

**hold on i still need
you**

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hold on i still need you by QueenWithABeeThrone

Category: IT (Movies - Muschietti)

Genre: Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Angst with a Happy Ending, Body Horror, Canon Typical Horror, Dreams and Nightmares, Eddie Kaspbrak Lives, Fix-It, Found Family, Gay Eddie Kaspbrak, Gay Richie Tozier, Internalized Homophobia, M/M, Possession, Role Reversal, Stanley Uris Has The Shining, Stanley Uris Lives, Temporary Character Death, domesticity but slightly fucked up, mentions of abuse and toxic relationships, pennywise is a sadistic motherfucker, tam lin au

Language: English

Characters: Ben Hanscom, Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough, Eddie Kaspbrak, Mike Hanlon, Pennywise (IT), Richie Tozier, Stanley Uris

Relationships: Eddie Kaspbrak/Richie Tozier

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2019-11-11

Updated: 2020-01-04

Packaged: 2020-01-20 15:47:52

Rating: Mature

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 9

Words: 50,433

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

“Don’t get possessed by a clown monster, Eds, it’s just not worth the cool shit you can do.”

“There’s nothing cool about living in a sewer and being possessed by the thing that tried to eat you,” says Eddie.

“Exactly,” says Richie.

or: Richie saves Eddie, but dies in his stead. a month later, Eddie starts dreaming of Richie, and soon finds out that he's not quite dead yet—It's possessed him, but Richie's fighting back. he can't hold on forever, though, so the Losers, especially Eddie, race against the clock to save Richie from Its clutches. and in the meantime, Eddie has to wrestle with his feelings for his childhood best friend, awakened by

Richie's last words.

(alternately: Tam Lin, but gay and with a clown instead of fairies!)

1. wait for me, i'm coming

Author's Note:

I wasn't going to upload this until it was finished, but I have had a shitty day today. I crave the validation.

fic title is from Chord Overstreet's "Hold On".

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from "Wait For Me" from *Hadestown*.

content warnings: vague allusion to suicide attempt (Stan, who survived it in this AU). possession and body horror. allusion to a toxic relationship and to past major character death. Pennywise being a huge creep and likening a young girl to meat.

Eddie dreams of Richie for the first time a month after Derry, and three weeks into a long, acrimonious divorce from Myra.

Okay, that's probably a lie. He's had dreams featuring Richie before, memory-dreams where they're kids playing Street Fighter, wet dreams where Richie lays him out on the bed and touches him all over, and nightmares of Neibolt—of Richie over him, the relief in his eyes before Pennywise's claw skewered him right through. Of Richie lying on the cavern floor holding his hand and whispering *I love you, god, I loved you so much*. Of blood soaking through Eddie's fingers, try as he might.

They'd had to drag him out kicking and screaming. Stan was badly hurt and needed immediate medical attention, and It had knocked them all around something fierce, broken bones and probably caused a lot of internal bruising and some internal bleeding. They couldn't have brought a dead body out with them, none of them had enough strength in them left.

But—

Well, what's *logical* doesn't really matter to Eddie's heart, doesn't it.

God, I loved you so much. Richie's last words still bounce around his skull, regretful and sad, *resigned*. So it's not the first time he's had a dream about Richie, before.

But—well, usually Eddie's dreams are much less detailed than this.

He's standing outside the Toziers' old house in Derry. It had been a cozy, homey old place, two stories and an attic, with a tree that you could climb that led you directly to Richie's window. Whenever Richie was grounded for his conduct grades (which was every quarter), Eddie would scurry up the tree and knock on his window. It doesn't look the same now in real life, the tree has long since been cut down and the house remodeled somewhat for the new family living in it, but here in the dream it looks the way it did when they were kids. It looks so *real*, too.

As Eddie watches, a red balloon floats out of the doorway. His heart climbs right into his throat at the sight of it, and unwillingly, his body turns to follow it, to chase after it. *Stop!* he wants to scream at himself. *Stop, stop, stop, you know what those are, you know what those lead to, stop running towards It stop—*

He turns the corner, but instead of the leper, or Pennywise, he just sees Richie, nervously tapping his fingers against his knees, near a storm drain that the balloon disappears into. And it's *Richie*, no doubt about it, there's the crack in his glasses, there's the jacket he was wearing when he died, there's Eddie's ratty old hoodie being worried in his hands. And there, too, is the gaping hole in his chest where It skewered him right through.

"Richie?" Eddie breathes.

Richie jerks his head upward. "Eds!" he shouts, and jumps to his feet. "Eddie, *Eddie*, help me—"

He doesn't get far. A white hand shoots out from the storm drain, and a horrible cackling noise fills the air like an air raid siren in a war movie. ***come back home, richie***, Pennywise's guttural voice sings, and yanks hard. Richie hits the ground with a scream, nails scrabbling at the concrete in a futile effort to keep from being dragged into the sewer.

“*Eddie! Help!*” he shrieks. Eddie moves fast, trying to catch his hand, but all he seizes is thin air, because with a burst of strength, It yanks Richie into the darkness with an evil laugh, mingling with Richie’s terrified screams.

Eddie’s knees hit the ground, and he stretches a trembling hand out towards the storm drain—

—and wakes up.

“What the *fuck*,” he says.

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The thing about grief is—

Myra had screamed and cried, when Eddie came back to get his things and go. She’d cajoled and demanded and wailed, asking why he had to go, why he had to leave her *alone*. She’d said, *I’m the only one who can take care of you, Eddie! You know that! Please let me take care of you!* She’d clung the whole way, and maybe in another world that would’ve been enough to make Eddie stay.

Only all he could think of was Richie, pushing him out of the way of the claw. *God, I loved you so much*, he’d said, resigned, knowing that he would die. If Eddie had to be asked what love was like, just after that, he would’ve been too paralyzed with shock and heartbreak to answer.

But if he’s asked now, he thinks he’d say this: love is not just wanting to take care of someone, as much as that’s a big part of it. Love is seeing someone and knowing, in the pit of your heart, that you would die for them, even if it meant losing your chance. Love means you get *hurt*, means you have to hurt because it’s you opening up the parts of yourself you hide away from everyone else to someone else. Love doesn’t mean *hiding* something to please someone.

Love and grief go together.

Myra hadn’t gotten it, of course. She had tried to push him into therapy with her therapist friend, but he’d googled the guy and not been impressed to say the least. She had screamed at him, asking him

to think about her just this once, why was he always thinking about himself these days, and he'd shouted back at her, *I just lost someone I loved! Can't you see that? Can't you take the fucking blinders off your eyes? I lost someone I loved and the only thing you're thinking of is how to fix me so you can have some—some fucking doll to coddle! I'm sorry, but this is not something you get to fix! I am not something that you get to fix because you're not fucking happy!*

They haven't talked, since then. He regrets shouting at her, yeah, but he doesn't regret what he said. He hopes, sincerely, that she finds someone she can love, one day.

Mike calls him, a week after Eddie's first dream of Richie. "I'm gonna be in New York for the weekend," he says.

"Oh, that's great!" says Eddie, setting the old picture strip of himself and the other Losers on the bedside drawer. Richie's there, grinning brightly at the camera, thirteen and so full of himself. He'd fought for this picture, for this little box of things that Myra had given up. "Do you need a place to stay? Tourist spots? God, please don't say you want to watch *Hamilton*."

"Fuck, I wanted to watch *Hamilton*," says Mike, joking, and Eddie groans. "Kidding, man, I know how hard it is to get tickets. Yeah, no, Ben mentioned he had a place here in New York, he's going to let me borrow it for the weekend. I have an itinerary already, but I wouldn't mind adding a couple more places. Really, I was just planning to ask you if you wanted to have drinks."

"God, yes, please," says Eddie. "Divorce has been messy as hell. Myra wants half my stuff and I'm considering just letting her have it, but—well, principle of the thing, you know?"

"Yeah, I know," says Mike. "Know a good place with some really strong drinks, then?"

Eddie names a place in Queens off the top of his head, a bar that's been there about as long as he can remember. He had never gone there, exactly, too worried over what could happen to him there, but now—well, he's divorced, he's between jobs, and he's alive. Might as well. "See you there this weekend," he says.

“You too,” says Mike, and cuts the call.

Not five minutes after that, as Eddie’s sorting through the rest of his box, Stan calls and says, “Hey, Eddie. Holding up okay?”

“Hi, Stan,” says Eddie, picking up a bird book. *Birds of North America*, it reads. Stan’s book. He’d moved away from Derry before Eddie could give it back, but he can now. “Yeah, I’m—I’m fine. I actually just got a box of my shit back from Myra, and your old bird book is in here.”

“I wondered where that went!” says Stan. “Great timing, Patty and I are heading up to New York. There’s a teachers’ conference this weekend there that she’s been invited to speak at, and I was thinking maybe while she’s at it, we could head out for drinks, you could give me the book back?”

“You and Mike both,” says Eddie, dryly.

“Fold me in with him, then,” says Stan. “Someone ought to drive you both home. Might as well be me.”

“Like you’re not going to get drunk enough to do karaoke,” says Eddie.

“I could do that sober,” Stan says. Then he pauses, and says, quietly, “Do you want to talk about—well. Neibolt?”

Richie, he means. They all heard, they all saw, they all mourned with Eddie after limping out of the hospital, six survivors out of lucky seven. Richie’s left a hole in all their hearts, an empty chair at a table for seven people, and they’ve all grieved his loss.

It’s just—

Eddie had loved him back. Loves him back. He knows that now, with the benefit of hindsight being 20/20 and all. The hole in his heart isn’t healing up, any time soon, especially with the strange dreams that he’s been having lately, but—he appreciates the effort. “No,” he says. “I’d rather not. But I can bring your book to the bar.”

There’s a soft exhale on the other end of the line. “All right,” says

Stan. "I'll swing by for it."

He hangs up, and Eddie starts sorting through the rest of the box. That one's Ben's old New Kids on the Block album, he'll save that for when Ben and Bev blow through New York again, maybe for the run-up to the Met Gala. This is Bill's first book *Homecoming Queen*, the one that had actually been pretty good the whole way through. That is the book Bev lent him for English class that he'd forgotten to give back. And that—

His heart catches in his throat.

Richie had made him a mixtape before the Toziers moved away. He remembers now—climbing into Richie's room, getting the mixtape, playing it and dancing along so raucously that old Wentworth had come up, told them to dance more quietly if they could to spare his ears, and then walked away with an amused chuckle. When Eddie had moved away, he'd always—he used to listen to this mixtape when he felt like shit, because the sound of it would soothe him, somehow. Which was dumb, but still.

He clutches it close to his chest now, as if it could somehow fill the hole in his heart that Richie's left behind.

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Eddie dreams again that night, the fourth time in a week.

They're sitting together in the clubhouse, and Richie's back is to the shadows. He looks haggard, scared, but when he sees Eddie again he smiles, relieved. "Glad you could make it," he says. "Hi, Eds."

"You motherfucker," says Eddie, before lurching forward and wrapping him up in a hug.

"Ow, ow, dipshit, my chest hole—" Richie pushes him away, and Eddie squints. Something's off with Richie's eyes. "Listen, I haven't got much time to talk."

"You're fuckin' dead, asshole, you can't talk anymore," says Eddie. "Fuck. I miss you. We all miss you."

Richie's mouth opens, but he shuts it again, eyes gleaming wetly in the dim light. "Bet it's all gloom and doom and depressing shit now, huh," he croaks. "Without me around, I mean."

"Fuck you," says Eddie, wetly, his voice hoarse. "I take it back, we haven't missed your trashmouth at all." But he pulls Richie into another hug, more careful this time. After a moment, Richie lifts his arms and hugs back. "I'm sorry. I *tried* to get you out, I swear, they had to drag me away from your body before the house came down on us all."

"Don't be," says Richie. "Don't, Eds, I mean it. You did everything you could, I'm just glad everybody else got out alive." Cold, wet lips press against Eddie's forehead, like a benediction, like forgiveness. "Hey, uh, Eddie, when I dropped that bomb on you—"

"Fuck you for dropping that bomb and dying right afterward, also," says Eddie. "You started my sexuality crisis. Jesus."

"I still got it," says Richie, a ghost of a smile touching his lips before it fades away again. "No, but—can you just forget about it? Please?"

"Say one more word, asshole," says Eddie. "One more and I'll slug you. I don't give a shit if you're just something my brain made up because I'm grieving you, I fucking will. I *can't* forget it because it's the *last thing* you ever told me." He breaks away, then, and frowns at the hurt written across Richie's face. Is it just him, or has the clubhouse grown darker, somehow? Is it just him, or have the shadows grown longer?

"I'm real," says Richie, "I'm real, Eddie, you have to listen to me, you have to warn them—"

"What are you talking about?" Eddie demands. "Richie—"

Richie tosses a frantic glance over his shoulder. "I can't stay here for long," he says. "Connection gets more fucked the farther from Derry you are, I'm trying to get the rest but it's tough, but I couldn't—Eddie, do you know what happens when people die? They turn into ghosts. Turns out that's the same for clown monsters from outer space." He clambers closer to Eddie, getting into his space, and says

desperately, “It’s dead but It *left a ghost*, and it’s trying to come back, you have to help me, Eddie, you have to—”

what do you think you’re doing, richie, comes that horrible, awful, familiar voice from the shadows at Richie’s back. Eddie freezes up, his blood turning to ice in his veins, and Richie makes a horrible whimpering sound. ***come play with the clown, richie! i’m so lonely down here, and you never play with me anymore, you only want to play with that sick little freak and his rotten friends—***

Richie pushes Eddie back, shielding him. “Eds,” he says, and this close Eddie can see flecks of sickly yellow in his eyes, “help, *help me* —”

Children’s hands, skeletal and decaying, burnt and broken-fingered, bloody and bruised, shoot out from the darkness, pulling Richie away. “*Eddie!*” he screams, reaching, and Eddie moves just a beat too slow, fingers just barely managing to brush against Richie’s before he disappears into the darkness.

Eddie wakes up, then, a scream trapped in his throat, sweaty and shaking. He reaches for his phone and dials Bev’s number.

“Hey, Eddie,” says Bev when she picks up, her voice light. In the background, Eddie can hear a dog barking, Ben laughing and calling *go fetch*. “Something up?”

“How did you know?” he asks.

“What?” Bev asks.

“That your dreams weren’t just dreams,” says Eddie, thinking about Richie, cold lips pressing against his forehead. His body had been cool against Eddie’s, and he’d been missing a heartbeat, but it had felt so *real*.

Bev doesn’t say anything, for a long moment. Over the phone, he hears the click of a lighter. “I don’t know how to explain it,” she says, at last. “Tell me what you dreamed.”

“Richie,” he says. “I dreamed about Richie.” And then he tells her about the dream that started all this, about this new one he’s just

woken up from. “And then I called you,” he finishes, “because out of all of us you’re the one with the most experience in—in weird prophetic dreams. Is this one?”

“When Richie shows up in your dreams, what does he usually look like?”

“Uh, himself?”

There’s a breath on the other end of the line, like Bev’s steeling herself. “What did he look like in these dreams?” she asks.

Eddie’s about to say *himself* when he thinks—*not quite*. Richie had been scared in all his dreams, trying desperately to reach him before It pulled him back, but it had only been this dream where he’d gotten a good look at him, gotten a good feel.

“He’d been cold,” says Eddie, slowly. “Like he was dead a while, just hadn’t decomposed. He had a gaping hole in his chest, and his glasses were cracked. And—Bev, I think his eyes had these little gold flecks in them.” *Like Its*, he remembers, suddenly, his brain calling up the memory of It looming over him, biting at his fingers, its eyes golden.

“And he said,” says Bev, softly, “that It left a ghost?”

“Uh, yeah,” says Eddie.

“Ghosts can possess people.”

“Oh,” says Eddie. “Fuck. Wait, does that mean I’ve been—”

“I don’t know,” says Bev. “I don’t think It’s trying to contact you. I think it’s *Richie*,” and her voice trips over his name, “and I think he’s telling the truth when he says he needs help. But I’m only guessing, I don’t know for sure.”

“But we have to tell the rest,” says Eddie.

“Yeah,” says Bev. “Ben and I can fly to England and pick Bill up, then we can get to New York this weekend. Mike and Stan?”

“I was already meeting with them anyway,” says Eddie, running a

hand through his hair. “For drinks. I can just drop the bad news on them before the weekend.”

“If anything changes,” says Bev, “let me know?”

“I will,” Eddie promises. “See you this weekend, Bev.”

“See you,” Bev echoes, and ends the call. Eddie puts it off to the side and lies back in bed, looking up at the ceiling.

“Rich,” he says, softly, “are you okay?”

No answer. Not even a mocking laugh. The farther away they are from Derry, the harder it is to communicate with Richie. He can only hope Richie will try again, next dream he has. He can only hope there’s enough of Richie left to try again.

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Stan takes it well when Eddie calls him to tell him. Well, compared to the last time anyway, when he’d very nearly tried to *kill himself*. This time he treats Eddie’s ears to some creative Yiddish cursing, instead, before saying, “Right, we’ll just make our hang-out a Losers’ Club reunion this weekend, huh?”

“Yep,” says Eddie, massaging his temples. His sleep is well and truly shot now, so he’s just making himself a cup of coffee while waiting for the New York sky to grow lighter and making calls. Then he adds, “Do you—Do you feel like, uh, taking a bath right now?”

“I appreciate that you’re trying to be tactful about it, at least,” says Stan, dryly. “No, I’m not planning to. I mean, it’s *Richie*. He’s the least scary person I know. And if he warned you, that means he’s still in there.”

Mike, when Eddie calls him, says as much too. “Should’ve figured It had a final trick up its sleeve,” he says, “but that Richie warned you—that’s good. It means he’s still Richie, at least partly.”

“*Partly*?” says Eddie, the word coming out harsher than he means to. “Shit. Sorry. What do you mean *partly*?”

"I mean that It is possessing him right now," says Mike. "Because we killed Its body, and it found a new one."

"In Richie's body," says Eddie, softly, the horror of it sinking in. Morbidly he wonders how Richie must've felt, waking up in the dark, dank pit of the cistern only to realize that something else, something dark and evil and *other*, was inside his body too.

Mike says, quietly, voice cracking, "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," says Eddie, knowing instantly what he means. Mike and Ben, who had a *broken rib*, had to pull him away from Richie, had to tell him they couldn't afford to lose any more time, the house was coming down around them, he had to leave the body, *that's not Richie anymore, Eddie, we have to go*. "God, no, *don't be*, okay? We couldn't do anything, Stan needed our help more." Stan had passed out from blood loss on the sidewalk as the house collapsed, and the rest of the Losers were injured, and exhausted, and heartbroken. Later the injuries would mysteriously heal while in the hospital, and Eddie had thought that the last of the magic It had left over.

"Yeah, but—"

"No," says Eddie, firmly. "Mike. We are going to get Richie back from It. Somehow. And we need you to not blame yourself for not knowing this was going to happen—we killed It! We killed the shit out of it so well it's a *ghost* possessing someone *fighting it*, it's that desperate." It's admirable how much he believes it, really, considering—well, when he thinks about it. It's really Eddie's own fault. If he hadn't turned his back on It then maybe Richie wouldn't be in this mess. Maybe all seven of them would've gotten out of the house on Neibolt Street. "We'll get him back," he says, optimistically.

"We'll get him back," Mike echoes, sounding more sure of himself now. "Yeah. And then we're gonna bust up a clown ghost."

"Who you gonna call," says Eddie, wryly.

"Losers' Club," says Mike, his voice a little off-key.

After that, the sky has grown light, so Eddie pulls on his running

shoes and goes for a run.

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Richie thinks he must be going mad, down in the dark.

Anyone would be, he supposes, if they were dead and then suddenly possessed by a demon alien clown. Things leave ghosts, and It is the type of ghost that does not want to go peacefully into the light. Richie's a ghost, and weeks (months, years, time is strange in the dark) have passed and he wants to go, wants to get out. Wants to go into the light, or at least haunt anywhere else but Derry's sewers.

But It is in him, moving under his skin, turning him into something less than human. (*more than*, he thinks sometimes, and pukes at the thought.) It brought him back because it needed a new body, and since then Richie's been down here, in the sewers, in the dark, talking to himself. How long has he been here? Ten months? Ten years? He doesn't know anymore. It's a jealous thing, won't let him take a step out into the sunshine no matter how much he shouts or curses or even begs.

stay with me, It says in the back of his mind now, as he peeks out of the storm drain. *i'm always here for you richie. not like your friends. they left you down here, all alone, but i saw you. i've always seen you.*

"Fucking shut up, creep," Richie mutters, scratching the back of his head with more force than strictly necessary. "I gotta get out of here, I'm—"

hungry? starving? you're a growing boy, you need food. He smells ham, all of a sudden, the fragrant sizzle of it cooking slowly in the pan invading his nostrils. God, he *wants* it, so badly, his stomach rumbling with hunger. *how about that one?* It continues, swinging Richie's head around to show him the chubby young girl descending from her bike.

"What the *fuck* is wrong with you?!" Richie snaps, clapping a hand over his own mouth and stepping backward to the sound of Its tittering laughter trying to escape from him. "Fuck, no, shut the fuck

up, you stupid hell-clown, I'm not eating anyone!"

just a little taste of her fear, It croons, and flashes something in his mind: a fly buzzing about, landing on a man, changing him from man to something else. Who the fuck let this kid watch such a weird movie, Richie wonders, and feels sick at the thought. How does he know she's scared of that? ***it'll taste so good richie and don't you want company? don't you want a friend? she can float with you!***

"I'm forty," says Richie, trying not to hurl on his own feet, "if I wanted company I'd go on Grindr, I wouldn't talk to some *kid*, you dumb fucker." He shuts his eyes against the blinding pain, against It trying to—to force fly wings out of his back, turn his eyes into bulging fragmented fly eyes. "No," he says, and with a monumental amount of effort, takes one step back from the grate. Then two. "No one's floating. Not her, nobody else."

what about eddie?

"You lay a fucking hand on Eddie Kaspbrak," Richie snarls, "and I swear to god I'll rip my own heart out."

you can't keep him safe forever, not from me, not from you, It says, singsong. ***he doesn't want you anyway, he left you down here, with me. you told him you loved him and he left you, threw you away like so much trash.***

They had to drag me away, Eddie had said, and he'd hugged Richie first, hadn't cared about the gaping hole in his chest or the dirt on his pants. He'd been grieving Richie. *We all miss you.*

"Fuck you, clown," says Richie, holding on to that memory. He is missed, he is loved. Hopefully, the Losers will be coming, and if there's anyone Richie can trust to defeat It again, it's them. He scrubs a hand over his face, then frowns. Shit. Teeth. He concentrates, digging up the last time he saw himself in a mirror, back when he was still alive, and turns the sharpened, knife-like rows of teeth into his mouth into something more human.

He turns away from the sewer grate, and starts walking back to the cistern.

There's something he needs to find.

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As per usual for the Losers, the second they get back together, they commandeer an entire table and descend into chaos.

"Guillermo *fucking* del Toro, seriously?" Eddie asks Bill, shoving lightly at his side. "You fucking bastard, you could've just said something in the group chat! Congrats, man!"

"Thanks," says Bill, laughing. "Audra's been smug for weeks since he got attached to the project, we're planning to meet with him and the casting director in December. I wanna make sure they get the casting right, y'know?" He casts a look around at the six of them, his smile falling a little when his eyes land on Richie's empty chair. "But del Toro's damn good, I don't doubt he'll make something good out of *Homecoming Queen*."

"Honestly, that was one of my least favorite books," says Bev. She holds her hands up as Bill tosses a bit of rice her way, and says, with a laugh, "You've met women, Bill! You've talked to women!"

"I know, I know," says Bill. "I was young, I was just starting out, it was my first real book."

"Still, Guillermo del *Toro*," says Mike. "That's a good pick. I loved his Hellboy movies, they were fun."

"I got around to watching *Crimson Peak* last week with Patty, it was terrifying as fuck," says Stan. "Fun, though."

"I watched *Pan's Labyrinth* when it came out," Ben says. "It was some affecting stuff. You're in good hands, Bill."

"Hey, also, Bev, Audra loves the dress you sent her," Bill adds, propping his chin up on her hand. "She's planning to wear it to her next red carpet, what do you want her to say when people ask her who she's wearing?"

"A Beverly Marsh original," says Bev, a corner of her mouth quirking upwards.

Seven glasses and several bottles of liquor come around. Eddie pours Richie's glass to half-full, and places it in front of the empty chair. Like Richie's going to come here, grinning brightly, bitching about traffic and being late to the party. Like Richie isn't trapped in Derry, possessed by It.

"So," says Bill. "Eddie—has Richie tried to talk to you again?"

"A couple of times," says Eddie. "Usually doesn't last long, though. He says the connection's fucked, because I'm so far from Derry." He takes a sip of his own beer. "Has he tried to talk to you guys?"

"Yeah," says Bev. "On the flight here, I dreamed of him, in the apartment my dad and I used to share. He looked like what you described, Eddie." She tucks her hair behind her ear, and says, "He was—cold to the touch. And scared, so scared. He was begging for help. He said that It left a ghost behind, that it was trying to come back using him." Her fingers tap against the glass, and she says, "He said he didn't blame us. He just wanted us to be okay. He mentioned he trusted us to defeat It again, if we had to. I think he was going to say more, but then blood started *gushing* from the faucet, and It...took him. It all went by so fast, I couldn't grab him."

He was screaming when It pulled him back, she doesn't say.

"So he isn't far gone yet, if he's trying to warn us," says Mike.

"How many times are we going to have to kill this fucking clown?" Stan mutters, massaging his temples. "Anyone else dreamed of Richie, besides Eddie and Bev? Because I've been having some strange dreams, too. Just—not as clear as Eddie and Bev's are."

"I think he tried with me," says Bill. "But it's like Beverly and Eddie said, the farther you are from Derry, the shittier the connection is."

"So one of us," says Ben, quietly, "might have to go back to Derry."

Mike lets out a breath, and says, "I could—"

"No," says Bill. "No, Mike, you've done *enough*. You don't have to go back to Derry."

"Who else will?" Mike asks, and he doesn't even sound or look pissed, just—sad and resigned. "Someone's got to keep an eye on things. On Richie. I can just move into the barn, do my research there."

"Actually," says Eddie, staring at the empty chair, at the half-full glass. Richie had reached for him, first. Had stretched a hand out to him as It dragged him into the sewers, into the dark, screaming, pleading, *help me, Eddie, please, you have to help me*. "I could go back." He looks up now to see shocked faces all around, and smiles tightly. "I'm unemployed and divorced," he says. "I can find a job in Derry, find a cheap place to stay in for the time being. Or Mike's barn, if he's fine with me deep-cleaning the place."

"Okay, no," starts Mike.

"You have something good out here, Mike," says Eddie. "You have—You've got a road trip, you're away from Derry, the rest of you all have *lives*. Me?" He shrugs. "Almost everyone who's going to miss me is in this room, at this table, and I'd be going to the one who's not here."

"You don't have to go," says Stan.

"Yeah, I do," says Eddie. "I'm the first person he reached out to." Richie had scabbled against the pavement, trying to get to him. "I'd have to tell my lawyers I'm moving to Derry, and any meetings they and Myra's lawyers need to have with me are going to have to be done via Skype, but—I can go." He smiles at his friends, at his family, these people he loves so much, and knows—to spare them from Derry, from It, he'll do anything. To save Richie, he'll do anything. "I'll keep in touch," he says. "Keep you guys updated."

"Eddie," says Ben, "if you want, if you're hell-bent on this—I can see if there's a place in Derry. Make sure you have a bed, a roof, some place to sleep in that you don't have to pay for." He smiles, tiredly, and says, "I'll make sure you don't have to deep-clean too much."

"I can call Ms. Jamison at the library," says Mike, "see if she's willing to let you take a job there. Or at least let you in after hours for research."

And just like that, they've started making plans to help Eddie pack up his life and move to Derry, to find some way they can save Richie. Bev mentions checking out other libraries, *maybe there's a method there we can use*, and Mike pulls out his road trip itinerary and starts adding occult libraries into the mix. Bill offers to loan Eddie some money if he needs it, Ben's already googling properties in Derry and asking for Eddie's approval. Stan buys Eddie more drinks, in the accurate opinion that Eddie is going to need a lot of drinks.

We're gonna get you back, Rich, Eddie thinks, desperately, trying to push the thought out of his head and all the way to Derry somehow. The empty chair is not going to be empty for a minute longer than absolutely necessary, not on Eddie's watch. *We'll save you. Just hang in there. We're getting you back.*

We're getting you back.

2. under pressure precious things can break

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from Gabrielle Aplin's "Please Don't Say You Love Me".

content warnings: canon-typical horror. some talk from Richie that can be taken as suicidal ideation, although Eddie argues against it. allusions to past emotional abuse and internalized homophobia.

"I'm going back to Derry," he tells Richie, the next time he dreams of him. They're sitting on the sidewalk outside of the Jade of the Orient, and every so often Richie looks back at the entrance nervously. There's new scars on him, Eddie realizes, like fighting off It is taking a toll on him. "You don't have to be alone anymore."

"What the *fuck*," says Richie. "Why would you go back to Derry? Mike's right there! He knows this place better than you do!"

"I know you, though," says Eddie. "And Mike—well, I mean, he shouldn't have to go back to Derry, not after waiting so long to get out of it." He shrugs, and leans back on his palms, trying to ignore the voice in his head screaming about diseases he can pick up touching the sidewalk like this. This is a dream. He's not gonna get anything. "I figured, well, between all the Losers, I'm the one no one will miss."

"Not even your wife?" Richie asks, and. Right. Nobody's told him yet. He'd died before Eddie divorced Myra, of course he wouldn't know.

"My ex-wife," Eddie corrects, and Richie's eyes go wide in response.

"Wow," says Richie. "Fuck. So you married *and* divorced your mom?"

"I can't fucking believe I'm going back to Derry so you can make worse jokes than this, dickbag," Eddie mutters, scrubbing a hand over his face. "And no, asshole, I divorced my wife so I could get with *your* mom."

Richie laughs, then, the sound of it startling out of him. Like he hasn't laughed like this in a while, easy and carefree. A knot in Eddie's gut loosens, as Richie's laughter tapers off into faint snickers. "Fuck," says Richie, "Eddie Kaspbrak gets off a *good* one, Jesus." He sobers up, then, and scratches absently at his wrists, where—fuck, where white makeup is beginning to spread, like a rash across Richie's skin. "I can't stay long," he says, "not without—I have to give you something so I *can*. So you'll be safe."

"How do you know that?" Eddie asks.

"I don't fucking know, I'm new to all this magic shit," says Richie. He throws another nervous glance back at the Jade. The lights inside are starting to flicker, in and out. "Fuck. Eds, tell everyone I miss them, okay? Tell them I love them, I don't regret anything with them other than the time I punched Bill in the face."

"Rich," says Eddie, taking hold of his hand.

Richie freezes in place, then relaxes, slowly. Behind them, the Jade's lights flicker once more before going still. "Okay," he says. "Here. Got you something. Don't know if it'll work, but if you believe it does, it will." He pulls away to rummage around in his jacket, and the lights flicker again, before finally going dark.

The doors start to rattle, as if something is pushing at them from the inside.

"Shit," says Eddie, and, unthinkingly, grabs on to Richie's arm just as the doors burst open, the leper crawling out at top speed to seize Richie by the ankle. "Shit! Rich! *Richie!*"

"*Eddie!*" Richie screams, as It pulls him away, Eddie's grip slipping even as he tries his hardest to hold on to Richie. "No, no, *no—*"

It yanks hard, once more. With a final anguished cry, Richie's hand slips out of Eddie's, and Richie is pulled, screaming, into the Jade.

Eddie runs after him, but the doors slam shut. ***don't you know how the movie goes by now, eddie,*** It taunts, from the Jade, from the sewers, from everywhere. ***don't you know a boy who likes boys is a***

dead boy? a sick boy? oh, eddie-bear, you're sick! you're going to die soon!

"Rich!" Eddie shouts, slamming his fists against the door. "Richie!"

he thrusts his fists against the posts and still insists he sees the ghosts, It sings, mockingly.

Eddie grits his teeth. "Richie, I'm coming to get you back," he says. Already he can feel the pull of the waking world, the dream beginning to loosen its grip on him. "We're coming. We're going to save you. We're gonna exorcise this fucking clown and we are going to *save you*, Richie Tozier, I believe that. I believe that. Richie, you know I—"

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When Eddie wakes up, there's a half-melted arcade token in his hand. From the Capitol Theatre, he realizes, suddenly—the arcade where Richie used to play Street Fighter with him all the time.

He looks down at it, then holds it up. Richie had given it to him before he'd been dragged off. Had said it would make sure he could stay, without fear of being dragged away.

Eddie believes that. Believes him.

He digs around his suitcases for his wallet, then looks down at the token. *It has to be on me*, he thinks, and grabs his phone to start googling arts and crafts stores in New York. He's got some time until he moves to Derry. He can afford a little project.

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The arcade token is hanging on a leather cord around his neck when Eddie pulls back into the parking lot of the Derry Townhouse. Ben and Mike help him haul all his things out of the car, and Ben says, "Can't believe we're back here again. This place was a little too easy to actually buy."

"Like the owner was trying to get rid of it fast," says Mike, looking troubled as he hoists one of Eddie's duffel bags up onto his shoulders.

“Eddie, you’re sure about this?”

“Of course I’m sure,” says Eddie, pulling along two of his suitcases. “They’ve probably even cleaned up the blood by now, I bet.” He hopes so, anyway, or else he’s gonna be very pissed off about the previous management’s priorities. “Come on. You guys are probably itching to get back to more important stuff.” *Itching to get out of Derry, home of the sewer clown from your worst nightmares.*

“This is important,” says Ben. “It’s Richie.”

Eddie can’t really argue with that. Instead, he just pushes the doors to the townhouse open, and whistles lowly. “They did not change anything at *all*,” he says. “But they restocked the bar!”

“Oughta get someone now who’ll do that,” says Ben to himself, as Mike heads upstairs to check on the rooms. To Eddie, he says, “Bev and I will be coming back around here in a couple of weeks to check up on things, that okay with you?”

“Yeah, sure,” Eddie mutters, already eyeing all the places that could definitely use a ton of cleaning. Still, for the moment, it’s serviceable for their needs. “How are you and Bev, anyway?”

Ben blushes, then ducks his head. “Good,” he says. “We got a dog.”

“Did you get it checked out?” Eddie asks.

“Of course,” says Ben. “Missy’s fine. That’s her name, Missy—she came with it attached already, so we figured we’d keep it.” He smiles, all smitten and happy. God. Eddie’s glad for him and Bev, he really is, they both deserve good things like a life together and a dog and maybe even kids someday, but something in his heart twists too. “We’re housebreaking her right now.”

“Nothing up here,” calls Mike from upstairs. “They cleaned up the crime scene, so you don’t have to worry about that, at least.”

“Thank fucking god,” Eddie mutters, and climbs up the stairs to see Mike peeking into the other rooms and giving a thumbs-up. “So what’s the verdict? Anything creepy I should know about? Anything I could be allergic to in there?”

“Unless you really do have dust allergies, then no, I don’t think so,” says Mike. “It’s a bit dusty in some of the rooms, but otherwise it’s all in order.” He walks over to clap Eddie on the back, and says, “If anything happens at all, or if you find something in the library when Ms. Jamison lets you in, you’ve got my number.”

“I got it, I got it,” says Eddie. “Just help me haul my shit to my room, and maybe we can explore the rest of this townhouse, see if there’s any way we can talk to Richie here.” They hadn’t done a whole lot of exploring here, the first time around, too busy trying not to die to Its tricks. Now they’ve got time, and they need to contact Richie somehow. Somehow.

So they go exploring. Ben and Mike head down to go see if the basement’s viable for communication with the dead, and Eddie looks in every bathroom, checking for—for what, he’s not sure. Undead Bowers? Richie? His mom? Fuck. He should be down with Ben and Mike.

He opens the door to his bathroom, and blinks at the letters written in red on his bathroom.

HI SPAGHETTI MAN, it reads.

For a moment his heart jumps into his throat, *oh god is that blood oh god are we too late*, before he realizes—the letters aren’t dripping. When he steps closer, he can see they’re made from lipstick.

“Stop giving me a fucking heart attack, asshole,” he says, resting his hands on the sink and breathing out slow. “Richie? Can you hear me down there? I don’t—I don’t know how this works, but if you’re here, I got your token. I’m wearing it right now. Also, I really hope you didn’t steal this lipstick from some poor kid. That’s kinda unsanitary.”

“I live in a fucking sewer, genius,” comes Richie’s voice from the sink, and Eddie’s breath catches in his throat. He’s missed him. He’s *missed* him, so much. “No, I, um. Got it from the last guests. They left their shit behind. Free fuckin’ shit for me.”

“Did you scare them all off or something?” Eddie asks. “Management included? If so, how the fuck did you do that?”

"I didn't mean to," says Richie. "I just walked in and they flipped. I didn't realize until—hey, did you know, when someone with a fucking hole in their chest and more teeth than a shark walks into a hotel and asks for a room, people freak the fuck out?"

"What the *fuck*," says Eddie, stunned.

"I didn't even know!" Richie says, and Eddie imagines him throwing his hands up in the air, helplessly annoyed. "I just wanted to make sure you got a room, but It really wanted to scare the shit out of people, I guess." There's a dark laugh from the drain, and Richie says, "Don't get possessed by a clown monster, Eds, it's just not worth the cool shit you can do."

"There's nothing cool about living in a sewer and being possessed by the thing that tried to eat you," says Eddie.

"Exactly," says Richie. "God, though—it's. It's good. That you're here. I'm not happy with it, 'cause Derry's a fucking shithole even at the best of times, but I'm—glad you're here, Eds."

"I'm glad you're not completely dead, Rich," says Eddie. "Just—hang in there, we're going to save you."

"What?" Richie asks, baffled.

"You said you wanted us to help," Eddie reminds him.

"Yeah, in exorcising the goddamn demon clown!" says Richie. "But I'm fucking *dead*, man. There's no way you can help me get out of that. I'm—I don't know how this works, I don't know how any of this magic shit It's so good at works, but I know for a fucking fact that right now the clown ghost is keeping me alive because *I'm Its new body*. You kill that, you kill me, and It's done, Eddie, It's gone for good."

"I'm not going to fucking *kill you*," snaps Eddie.

"You might not have a choice!" Richie yells back, and Eddie actually feels the air blow out of the drain. He backs up before anything can come spurting out of the sink, but nothing seems to be trying to bubble up or anything. "I'm—fuck, I'm sorry, but I've had time to

think about it, it might be the only way.”

“Fuck that,” says Eddie, bluntly. “*Fuck that*. I uprooted my entire fucking life in New York to come here and get you out. We’re going to find a way to get you out of the sewers without killing you, Rich, that’s unacceptable.”

“Yeah, but—”

“No *buts*,” Eddie says. “We’re getting you back, and It can eat shit.” He pauses, and adds, “Tell It that too. If it’s possessing you then it should know, we’re gonna kick its ass.”

“I forgot how fucking stubborn you are when you wanna be,” says Richie, sounding all choked up. “God, Eds, I—It could hurt you. I could hurt you. You’re sure about this? You’re sure you want to try to save me? After what I told you back in the cistern, after I fucking dragged you all the way back here to ask you to pretty please kill me?”

Richie, nobody’s ever told me they loved me like this without expecting anything of me before. He doesn’t say that, but—Richie had never asked him to say it back. Richie loved him without expecting it back, without suffocating Eddie in love. Richie had rolled him over and *died* in his place, and he could’ve asked Eddie to lie to him and say he loved him back but he didn’t, he didn’t. All he did was tell him: *I love you, god, I loved you so much.*

It’s funny, really. The one time Eddie wants to say it back, and he can’t. The words stick in his throat like phlegm, and he swallows them back down. *I love you*, he thinks, hopelessly, helplessly. *I love you so much*. “Yes, you asshole, I’m sure,” he says. “We’ll save you. You’re not dying to the clown again, Rich. You’ve died one too many times because of It already.”

“Yeah, 0/10, don’t recommend,” Richie says. Then his voice takes on an odd, almost malicious, *un-Richie* tone, and he says, “**but then again i wouldn’t be in this mess if you didn’t—fuck. No. No, no.**” There’s the sound of a thud, like Richie’s kicked something. “Shit,” says Richie, “shit, *shit*, Eddie, I gotta go. I have to go.”

“Wait, Richie—”

“I need to go or It’s going to fuck with both of us,” says Richie, sounding desperate now. “I’m sorry. I’m *sorry*. Eddie—I have to go, I’ll see you later.” And Eddie jumps back as grey water bursts forth from the drain, all over the mirror, wiping away the lipstick letters.

He can hear children from below, giggling. *You’ll float too*, they sing in the back of his mind, and he swallows the bile that rises in the back of his throat.

“Fuck,” says Eddie, staring at the mirror dripping with grey water. He races out of the bathroom, out of the bedroom, and back down to the lobby. “Guys! *Guys!* Ben, Mike, where are you?” He pauses, then frowns. “Did they already leave?” he mutters to himself. It would be out of character for them, but then anyone would get spooked being in Derry for any longer than a few minutes. Begs the question of why Eddie’s willingly staying here, instead.

Then he hears Ben call, “Rich? Richie! *Richie!*” below his feet.

--

By the time Eddie makes it to the basement, Richie’s already gone. Hasn’t even left a trace, although Ben and Mike look plenty surprised, their flashlights trained on a spot where Richie must’ve appeared, leading off to a drain that leads to the sewers.

“Fuck,” says Ben, “he was—he was *right here*—”

“Guys,” says Eddie, panting, “guys, I talked to him. I talked to him, he’s—well, he isn’t *okay*, I’m honestly worried—”

Mike jerks a thumb towards the pipes and says, “We saw him too. Just turned around and there he was.” He chews his lip. “He looked like himself—mostly. But there were splotches of white paint on his skin, and he looked terrified when we tried to talk to him.”

Ben lets out a breath, his brow furrowing as he glances back over at the pipes. “I stepped closer and he *ran*. I think he’s scared of us.”

“No,” says Eddie, thinking of Richie’s voice, the desperation soaking

through every word. “No, he’s scared *for* us.” And he tells them about the bathroom: the lipstick, the conversation, what Richie was asking, the change in his voice when It had briefly taken him over. “He doesn’t want to hurt us,” he concludes. “He’d have died first before hurting any of us. That’s why he ran, I think. When he felt It starting to break through, he ran so It couldn’t use him to get to us.”

“He always was protective,” says Ben, quietly. “Stands to reason he’d want to protect us from himself.” He huffs out a breath, and says, “But Losers stick together. That way we win.”

“I’ve been doing some research, actually,” says Mike. “Mostly occult research, but I checked a few sites about kidnapping survivors—”

“Kidnapping?” Eddie asks.

“Closest thing I could find to ‘demonic possession by sewer clown’,” says Mike, turning his flashlight off and tucking it into his bag. “Richie’s situation shares a lot of things in common with a lot of kidnapping cases, actually. He’s being kept in isolation by an entity with perceived power over him, against his will, in a confined, cramped space. If he’s been trapped here as long as he’s been dead, It’s had time to subtly influence his way of thinking.”

Eddie snorts out a laugh, hearing it echo through the basement. “Richie wouldn’t think like It,” he says. “He ran when he felt it breaking through.”

“Exactly,” says Mike. “It’s influencing him by convincing him it’s better *for us* if he’s isolated. Safer, because he’s dangerous.”

“He’s the least dangerous person I know,” says Eddie, incredulously.

“He was,” says Mike.

“Was?” asks Ben. “It’s *Richie*.”

“Yeah,” says Mike. “The more isolated he is, though, the stronger It will be. And then he *will* be dangerous.”

They follow Mike back up the stairs, back up to the lobby. Eddie pauses on the last step up, and looks back to the sewers, trying to

catch a glimpse of Richie.

"I'm not going anywhere," he says.

He swears he can hear a soft sigh, somewhere in the pipes.

--

When Eddie falls asleep, the first night in the townhouse, the arcade token is warm against his skin, next to his heart.

He opens his eyes on a sunny beach with no sewer in sight and only the scent of the sea, and curses at the grit of sand under his toes. He didn't bring beach clothes for this dream, fuck, shit, *fuck*. When he turns, he sees Richie, looking around in wonder, more himself now than he'd been before: no gaping hole in his chest, no splotches of white on his skin, no golden flecks in his eyes. Just Richie, the way he looked at the Jade, the way he looked before they walked into the house on Neibolt Street.

"Eddie!" Richie says. "Holy shit, it worked!"

"*Richie*," says Eddie, his voice a wrecked thing, and he charges forward to pull Richie into a hug. "Fuck, you okay?"

"You moved to Derry of your own free fucking will to save my dead ass and you're asking *me* if I'm okay?" Richie asks, but his arms wrap around Eddie anyway to hug him back.

"Between the two of us, I'm not the one possessed by a demon clown," Eddie shoots back. He pulls away then, really looks Richie over, and smacks him on the chest. "You dick," he says, "don't ever fucking die on me again."

"I can't promise that, Eds," says Richie. "I can't promise anything, but that at least we're not gonna be interrupted by Pennywise here." He waves a hand at the sunshine, the tide lapping at their bare toes, the baby turtles making their way towards the ocean with no fear of predators. It's peaceful, here, in a way Eddie's never really known. "Fuck. Look at *you*, so fucking cute as always."

"Fuck off," says Eddie, with no real heat behind it, making only a

token effort to pull away as Richie pinches his cheek and chants *cute cute cute*, like when they were kids. “We’re forty, we stopped qualifying for cute at least twenty years ago.”

“Aw, bay-bee, you’ll always be cute to me,” says Richie. “C’mon, sit down, I promise you’re not gonna get dream germs or dream bugs off the sand here.”

“Why the fuck would either of us dream germs?” Eddie asks, but he sits down anyway, next to Richie. The tide comes in and washes over their bare feet, leaving behind seashells and pulling in the turtles. “So. The cistern.”

“Oh, fuck,” says Richie.

“You said you loved me,” says Eddie.

Richie flops back onto the sand, his hands serving as a pillow for his neck. “Can we not talk about that?” he asks. “Can we talk about literally anything else other than me spilling my feelings all over myself like a kid? I thought I was going to *die*. I actually did die.”

“Yeah, well, tough luck, we’re talking about it,” says Eddie. “You kicked off my mid-life crisis, dickwad, the least you can do is talk it out with me.” He leans back as well, but only rests his palms on the sand and tries not to panic over the kinds of diseases it must have. It’s a dream. He’s not going to pick anything up from it.

“What, really?” Richie asks. “I’m honored. All I had to do was confess my undying love and then die immediately after.”

“Fuck you for that last part,” says Eddie. “I missed you. Everyone missed you. Stan *cried*. And you—you spent your last words on telling me you loved me. Of *course* I had a crisis after that, because—” He stops. Lets out a breath. Says, “Did you want me to say it back?”

“God, that would’ve been nice,” says Richie, “but no. No, I never thought you would, I never expected you to say it back. I just—I didn’t want to die without you knowing I loved you.”

“Past or present?” Eddie asks.

Richie is quiet, looking away into the surf. He takes his glasses off, absently rubs over the lenses with the fabric of his shirt. "I wish it was past," he says, quietly. "I've never not—even when I forgot you. Even when I tried to forget I was even—I've never *not*."

Eddie thinks of his mother, of the pills she said he needed, the poison of her love seeping into his system. Of Myra, screaming, *I'm the only one who knows how to take care of you, say you love me, say it back*, unable to deal with her grief for the loss of her marriage and unable to understand *his* grief for the loss of his best friend.

Of Richie, and the relief in his face when he rolled Eddie over, the resignation in his eyes when he confessed. He never asked Eddie to say it back. He'd only ever told Eddie he was braver than he thought. He only ever asked Eddie to look at him, to be his friend.

Eddie's never been loved, like that. Like it's enough to just be there, to just be friends. Like even if he doesn't say *I love you* back it'll be fine, anyway, because it's already a given he loves them back, in any way he can.

He loves Richie back, the same way Richie loves him.

The only problem is, even here, the words are trapped in his throat, like flies in amber. He's used to saying them on command, like a doll that speaks when you squeeze its hand, but on his own they dry up, on his own they're stuck, and he could never ask Richie to tell him to say it right back. He half-thinks Richie wouldn't even believe it, that way, and he *needs* him to believe it. But here they can touch, so he gently, hesitantly, takes hold of Richie's hand and squeezes.

It's warm, here. He can feel a pulse, here.

"You're not alone, you know," he says, instead of everything else he wants to say, instead of *I love you*. "I, um. I tried not to look at it too much, after Derry, but I think I was—and marrying Myra was just—"

He falters. After a lifetime of keeping it secret, how do you say it? *Just fucking say it, asshole.*

"I was lying to myself when I proposed to her," he says, at last.

Richie squeezes back, and bumps his shoulder. “At least you divorced her now,” he says, his hand holding on tight to Eddie. “You can fuck any guy you want now, and I hear there’s this thing called Grindr you can use if you wanna fuck someone in the area.”

“Fuck you,” huffs Eddie, feeling lighter for Richie’s jokes. “I’m in the middle of a sexuality crisis, I’m not going out to fuck a random guy in Derry.”

“God, no, all the hot people already moved out of Derry,” says Richie.

“Maybe I don’t want to fuck a stranger,” Eddie says. “Maybe I just—” He stops, looking right at Richie. *I want you. I want you.* “Maybe I don’t feel like fucking someone while we’re trying to get you back from the dead, how about that?” he says. “I’m gonna be busy trying to make sure It doesn’t try to eat people with your trashmouth, it’s already dirty enough.”

Richie doesn’t say anything to that, but his expression shutters, and he looks away.

“Rich?” Eddie asks. “Hey. Hey, dude, come on, look at me. What’s up?”

“I didn’t eat anyone,” says Richie, “but—when I walked into the townhouse and scared the *shit* out of people? I didn’t do it on purpose, I think that was more It than me, but I could.” He gulps, then slips his hand out of Eddie’s to push himself up to a sitting position, pull his knees up to his chest. “I could *taste* them,” he says, “I could taste the fear and I swear to god, Eds, it tasted—it felt like—I was so fucking *hungry*, and it was just a, a *taste*, not quite enough, and I wanted—I wanted more.” He digs his fingers into his scalp and says, “I didn’t let myself, I’ve got a fucking body count already and like fuck am I adding anybody else to it, but—It’s hungry. And *I’m* hungry.”

Eddie drums his fingers on his knees. “I get scared easy,” he says. “You could—You could turn into the leper and scare the shit out of me. Would that tide you over?”

“Hah,” says Richie, “no.” He scrubs his hand over his face and shakes

his head. "That's not happening. I'm not scaring you just to stave off the hunger, this isn't like a fucking vampire thing where you can bleed a little into my mouth and it'll be fine. It *wants to eat you*."

"If It tries to eat me using you as a vessel I'll chase it off," says Eddie, with a shrug. "I mean, honestly, it was just a dumb fucking clown in life, now it's an even worse clown as a ghost, what with the whole possessing a shitty comedian thing."

"Ouch, going for the jugular, aren'tcha?" Richie says, putting a hand over his heart, failing to stop a smile. "Eddie Kaspbrak getting off a good one, *yowza*—"

"Shut up, Rich," says Eddie, smacking his shoulder and taking his hand again, squeezing once, twice, three times. "I want to help you. I want to help tide you over until we can get this fucking alien clown out of you. If it means letting you feed off my fear a bit, that's fine. God knows I've got plenty of fear."

"Faced up to them all anyway," says Richie, squeezing back three times. He looks down at their joined hands, then looks up at Eddie, then chews his lower lip before he says, "So—are we—this, now? Because I dunno if you noticed but I'm not the hot catch I used to be."

"I noticed," says Eddie. "You live in a fucking sewer and you haven't changed out of your clothes in *months*. You probably reek to high heavens now. I don't know why I—The only reason I'm holding your hand by now is because this is a dream and I can't catch shit in dreams."

Richie brings their joined hands up together and says, "Oh? So you won't mind if I do this, then?" Then he presses a kiss to Eddie's knuckles, and Eddie's heart beats fast against his chest, the arcade token feeling hot against his skin. His cheeks are burning. His heart is a rabbit in a cage trying to escape into Richie's chest. Or maybe elope with Richie's heart. "I mean, if you do actually mind I can back off and we can just forget—"

"I don't mind," says Eddie. "And I don't want to forget this or what you said in the cistern." He sucks in a deep breath. "Yes," he says,

being brave. “Yes, we can be—this. I—Take me out to dinner first, Rich.”

“You want a proper date with me,” says Richie, with a slightly gobsmacked look on his face, “the guy currently possessed by a sewer-dwelling flesh-eating alien monster ghost, who can’t go out in public because of the *gaping chest hole*.”

“We’ll figure something out,” says Eddie. “Ideally, we’ll figure out how to deal with the monster ghost before we go on the first date. But realistically, we’ll figure something out about the date.” *I love you, I love you*. “This doesn’t count, by the way,” he adds. “As a date. I expect better.”

“Sure, lemme think about how much better I can make it while stuck in the goddamn sewers,” Richie huffs, but he’s smiling, the fingers of one hand loosely curled now around Eddie’s wrist. “Lemme see if I can find a restaurant down there that serves something other than pisswater and rats.”

“Ugh, fine, I’ll find one for you,” says Eddie.

“Aw, Eds, you spoil me.”

“Don’t call me Eds.”

Beyond them, the last of the turtles blinks at them, before it’s claimed by the surf.

3. my lifeline still hums and sings

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from Vienna Teng's "Goodnight New York".

content warning: gaslighting and manipulation from Pennywise. this fuckin clown's a creep.

Ms. Jamison at the library, it turns out, is Ms. Catherine Jamison, assistant-turned-head librarian in the wake of Mike's departure, also known as little Cathy, the kid that Ben used to babysit sometimes for some extra cash for building materials. It's strange seeing her now, in a smart pantsuit and cat-eye glasses when Eddie is so used to seeing her in a little dress with pink hearts screaming for ponies.

"Yes, well, I grew up and learned ponies were not for little girls from poor little towns in little old Maine," says Cathy, when Eddie brings this up at her new desk. Unlike Mike, so far as he knows, her office is not surrounded by occult artifacts and books. She peers at him over her cat-eye glasses, her eyes hard enough that he squirms under them. "So. Eddie Kaspbrak. Mike said you'd want a job and access after hours."

"Yeah," says Eddie. "I already dropped off my resumé yesterday with your secretary—"

"I got it and read it," says Cathy. "Risk analysis, huh? Cozy job in a good city. Why'd you quit?"

Fuck, why did Eddie think this would be easy? He's only been in this office for three minutes and already he wants out of here.

"I, uh, wanted a fresh start," he says. "I got divorced from my wife, just recently, and I couldn't really stay in New York." He shrugs. "Too much of her there. The job—well, uh, I guess I just woke up one day and realized I couldn't stand it anymore."

Which is a pretty sanitized account of what had really happened, which was that Eddie had a breakdown at work and then quit right

afterwards, because all his colleagues kept looking at him with eyes full of pity, like they thought they knew what he was grieving. *Sorry for your loss, but hey, you're rid of the old ball and chain now!* God, no, fuck no. Sure, the divorce hurts, but it's been a long time coming, it's a boil that's been lanced. His grief is different. His grief and his love are tied up all together, and weigh as much as the corpse of his best friend in his arms.

Cathy stares at him for a little while longer, then huffs out a sigh. "And so you moved back to Derry?" she asks. "There are better towns to move to. There are bigger libraries that pay more that you can work in, if you really want to work in a library."

"There's just—something about Derry's library," says Eddie, a little evasively, "that's pulling me in. I used to live here before, and I think it's past time I gave back, right?" He gives her a winning smile, and hopes it doesn't look too forced.

Cathy drums her manicured nails against the surface of her desk. Then she sighs. "Well, beggars can't be choosers," she says, and stands up. "Come to work tomorrow at 9 AM, Mr. Kaspbrak. Financial Services could use someone of your caliber." She pinches the bridge of her nose and says, "They could use pretty much anyone."

Eddie blinks at her, and says, "Wait—is that it?"

"Mike vouched for you," says Cathy, and Eddie is never going to say a word against nepotism ever again, if it gets him a job this easily. "And we, unfortunately, need a *lot* of help finances-wise. Library budgets are, if you'll excuse the crassness, generally fucked."

"Oh," says Eddie.

"You're a risk analyst, you can lessen some of the burden on our budget," Cathy continues. "You're—well, you're actually overqualified for the job, speaking frankly, and we have a skeletal department in Financial Services as it is. You can start as its manager tomorrow, and we'll see how it goes from there. And I'll grant you access to the library after hours, too, for—whatever it is you wanna do here."

“Great,” says Eddie. “Hey, uh—did Mike leave anything behind here, before he left?”

“You mean the collection of, and pardon the crassness again, occult bullshit I have to deal with in the basement?” says Cathy, dryly. “Yes. He did. But at least he left a hefty donation of books from his private collection that I can put on display.” She cocks her head to the side. “Why?”

“Just wanna take a couple home to read,” says Eddie. “Just for kicks. Oh, and—have you got any favorite restaurants around here?”

“Jade of the Orient,” Cathy instantly says. “Again, why?”

“Anywhere but that,” says Eddie, shuddering at the memory of the things that came from the fortune cookies. “I promised someone a date.”

--

It turns out there’s an Italian place in town that sells some passably good pasta. Eddie heads there to get a salad and one order of carbonara, and then sits on the sidewalk outside next to the storm drain and deposits the carbonara in front of it. “Richie, if you’re there, I got you some food,” he says. “Rich?”

“I’m here,” Richie confirms after a moment, a growl to his voice, and Eddie sees a hand—furred and clawed—dart out of the storm drain to yank the carbonara inside. With the same growl in his voice, he adds, “Give—Fuck, just give me a second, I—I’ve been having a shitty day.”

Eddie turns towards the storm drain. “What’s going on?” he asks.

“Fucking It fucking shifting me when I didn’t *fucking ask*,” Richie mutters. With every word, the growl lessens until he sounds human again. Until he sounds more like himself. “Fuck. I hate this.”

“Me too,” says Eddie. Suddenly all he wants to do is reach for Richie and pull him into a hug, but the most he can do is drop his hand into the storm drain and hope Richie’s feeling more himself than It. After a moment’s hesitation, he does, and feels a cold, clammy hand squeeze tight before letting go. “Jesus! Fuck, that’s cold.”

"I'm dead and living in a sewer," says Richie. "What did you expect me to feel like, a furnace?"

"I don't know," Eddie mutters, and discreetly wipes down his hand with an antibacterial wipe. He cracks the plastic container of his salad open and spears a bit of lettuce onto his fork. "I got a job at the Derry library, by the way. Financial Services. I did research and I'm in the department that's in charge of not only their funds but also how to raise those funds. Like, yeah, state and government funds are a part of library funds but they're not actually a huge part, most of what they get is from tax funds and then donations from library-goers, at least here in Derry. Cathy—that's Mike's successor, you know, the kid Ben used to babysit—"

"Wait, the kid who used to yank on my hair and cry because I didn't wanna be her fucking pony?" Richie asks, incredulously. "Her?"

"Yeah, her," says Eddie, snorting out a laugh at the memory. "Remember when she tried to steal my fanny pack and started crying because I wouldn't let her take a look inside it?"

"I think she broke a window just from crying so hard," says Richie. "Oh my god. Did you make her cry?"

"Why the fuck would I make the person I'm trying to work for cry?" Eddie says. "Although I will admit I think she might've cried out of relief afterwards. She mentioned Financial Services was pretty barebones."

"Holy shit, you're a financial Superman," Richie says, marveling. "Swooping in with your pressed suit and your anal-retentive ass to save the day for libraries in Derry. Telling them not to touch this book or this idea or they'll go way over budget."

"I'm only managing their funds because I want access to their shit after hours," says Eddie. "Also, you weren't this interested in my job before."

"I wasn't stuck in a sewer with fucking nothing to do but try not to let a killer clown ghost take over me before," says Richie. "When all you know is greywater and a dumb fucking clown hammering at your

skull 24/7 trying to make you eat people, risk analysis starts to sound real exciting in comparison.”

“I’d ask how you’re doing but that sounds like a good summary,” says Eddie, wincing. “How’s the skull?”

“Could do with less clown but it’s not cracked yet,” says Richie. “What’re you eating?”

“Salad,” says Eddie.

“*Why*,” says Richie. “The fuck, man?”

“It’s healthy,” says Eddie.

“It’s sad is what it is,” says Richie. “I died and got dragged into the sewers and *I’m* crying for you, Jesus. Eds. Live a little! Accept burgers into your life!”

“Fuck you,” says Eddie, cheerfully. “I’ll eat a burger if you willingly eat a salad, how about that?”

There’s a groan from the sewers, and Richie says, “God, no. I don’t think I could eat a salad, anyway, not—not right now, with It. Meat’s really more its thing, and all. The pasta I’m barely managing to get down.” There’s a pause, then, “But god, I missed actual food. Fuck, is this actually any good or am I just biased from the hunger? I can’t really tell anymore.”

“Honestly, it’s not that good,” Eddie admits. “So—hang on, by meat do you mean *specific* meat, or just any kind of meat? Does it need to be prepped in some way?”

“Anything but people,” Richie says, firmly. “I dunno how It likes its people but I prefer my steaks well-done and strictly made out of animals.”

“So next time I could drop off a burger, hypothetically, and you’d be able to eat it,” Eddie concludes. “How about candy bars?”

“You know what, sure,” says Richie. Eddie sees his elbows poking out of the sewer, like he’s resting them on a table. “It’s like you said,

right? It has to play by the rules of the things it shifts into. And since I'm possessed by It, it has to play by my rules, most of the time." He laughs, a little, and it echoes oddly in the sewers. "No wonder it keeps trying to turn into anything else besides me. The scariest thing about me's probably just how big my dick is."

"I thought that was your five-foot forehead," says Eddie.

"*Ouch*, that was a good one," says Richie. He slips into a Voice, like a radio announcer: "Ladies and gents, I'm pleased to announce that Eddie Kaspbrak has just gotten off a good one! **what will he do next, do you know? will he sink or will he float? only one way to find out, richie, all you have to do is just reach out, he's so close—no! No, no —**"

"Richie?" Eddie says, alarmed. He turns on his heel, pushes off the sidewalk and crouches down in front of the storm drain. He can't see Richie. "Rich, come on, talk to me—"

"I'm sorry, I'm so fucking sorry," says Richie, sounding wrecked, *afraid*, none of the levity from just a few minutes before left in his voice. Eddie thinks suddenly of what Mike had said. It could make them see anything, and it hadn't needed to possess them. With Richie essentially under its power, what else can it do? It's already taking his talent for voices and twisting it around to use against them both. "Eddie—I can't stay."

"Rich!" Eddie calls, but he hears the sound of footsteps, growing more and more distant. "Richie! Richie, it's *me*, you don't have to go, we'll—"

He's gone.

--

Richie doesn't talk to Eddie for a day or two.

It's—fucked up, he knows. Eddie upended his whole life to come back here to Derry so he could get Richie out of the sewers, he's not going to be pissed at Richie just because It managed to fuck up their—their *date*, Jesus. It counts, even with the way it ended. Even then, the cold

remnants of his heart still flutters at the thought of it, of Eddie's hand touching his for even the briefest of moments.

But It had managed to seep in and kick what little peace they'd won all to pieces, with that damn voice breaking the radio announcer's. And now he thinks—

Had the carbonara been real? Had Eddie chatting about his job been real, complaining about juggling finances for a library? Had—There are two moments in Richie's head, where Eddie pulled his hand away from the storm drain, one too slow and one too fast. He—He *thinks* the touch had been just a heartbeat too slow to break easily. He thinks. He's not sure.

He'd always known It to be a sadistic piece of shit, but this is a whole new level of utterly fucked up.

the fun's just beginning, It whispers, sing-song.

Richie slams the heel of his palm against his forehead and snaps, "Shut the fuck up. What the fuck—What are you *doing* to my head?"

nothing, It says, and Richie feels an ache in the back of his head. When he shuts his eyes, he can see the deadlights, spinning in the darkness. ***i'm not doing anything, you're just remembering things wrong.***

"And whose fucking fault is that?" Richie asks. "Because I remembered things fine before you came along, you little bitch."

sure about that? And the hell of it is, It doesn't even sound like it's trying to taunt him. It just sounds concerned. Richie knows, intellectually, that It's lying through the teeth it doesn't have anymore, that if It knows how to turn into other people to fly under the radar before it kills someone then it can act like a concerned friend to the guy it's trying to turn into its new vessel. But god, It sounds so *real*. ***i want you in good shape, richie, i would never hurt you. but if you hurt yourself, then what am i going to do?***

"Go fuck yourself," Richie hisses. Hurt flares up at the back of his mind, and he says, "Yeah, fuck you. I don't give a flying fuck about

your feelings, you shit-ass clown, don't try to make me think you give a single shit about mine."

i'm hurt, It whispers. *i care about you, richie. i missed you when you were gone, did you know? now that i've got you, i never want to leave you.*

Bile rises in the back of Richie's throat. He chokes it down. "Fuck you," he snarls, and the sound echoes around the cavernous sewer that's become his home. "Fuck you, leave, *leave*."

It's a vain hope, but It retreats for now. Richie breathes out slow, scrubs a hand over his eyes. God, he misses the Losers. He misses the easy camaraderie, the way they all fit together, jagged edges and all, even twenty-seven years after.

He misses Eddie, like he misses the sunshine on his skin.

He closes his eyes and breathes out slow. *Please be asleep. Please let me in. Please.*

--

Richie opens his eyes on the rooftop of a college dorm building, the New York City skyline somewhere beyond them. Eddie sits on the edge, too old for the NYU hoodie he's wearing but not for the bottle of beer in his hand, and Richie's heart beats fast. In Eddie's dreams he's alive and breathing again, his heartbeat a steady drumbeat in his chest.

Eddie turns his head to look at him, and breathes out a relieved sigh. "Thank fucking god you showed up, Rich," he says. "I've been worried sick for *days*. Where were you?"

"The sewers," Richie answers, sitting right down next to him. Their feet dangle off the edge together, and below them, people are milling about, stumbling home and going out. "Where else can I go?"

"The townhouse," says Eddie. "Ben and Mike saw you there, you could come there if you wanted. To recuperate." He puts the beer down between them and looks at Richie, and says, "For what it's worth, before Pennywise showed up like the world's most murderous

fucking chaperone, I liked the date. It was—nice.”

“High praise coming from you,” Richie teases, lightly bumping his shoulder.

“Shut the fuck up, dickhead, I haven’t done a lot of dating,” Eddie mutters, flushing bright red. “Myra and I were set up together on a blind date, and it—didn’t feel as good, as the one we had.”

“Fuck, that’s kinda sad,” says Richie. “I live in a sewer and I’m still a better date than the former Mrs. K.” The former *former* Mrs. K, on the other hand—yeah, no, not hard to be a better date than her either, he figures. The bar’s pretty low if Richie, undead and possessed and chaperoned by an evil murderclown, can still give Eddie a pretty good time while trapped in the fucking sewers.

“Yeah, well,” says Eddie, “I—like you already. I’m predisposed to liking you.” He huffs out a breath. “Even if the height of your sense of humor is bad puns about fucking my mom.”

“It’s a classic,” Richie stoutly says. Hesitantly, he lets his fingers creep closer towards Eddie’s, and tries to look away, down towards the people moving about their night below them. He can’t hear their conversations from up here. “Did you do this a lot?” he asks.

“Back in college, yeah,” says Eddie. “When the neighbors got too loud but I didn’t feel like leaving the building. I conned someone into letting me have the key to the roof and started coming up here sometimes.” He leans up and looks up at the stars, but Richie’s eyes are only on him, on the line of his neck, his profile tilted up towards the sky. Richie’s mouth goes dry. “Will you look at that,” Eddie murmurs, “those stars look like a turtle.”

“I guess they do,” Richie says, looking at Eddie. Their fingers are touching now, and Eddie’s made no move to pull his hand away. Richie wants to—to take a picture of this moment, somehow. Bring it out into the real world, as irrefutable proof against Its whispers: *Eddie came here for me. There are people who love me, and you are not one of them.* “Hey, uh—where’d Mike and Ben go? Where’s everybody else?”

“Looking for ways to get you out of the sewer,” says Eddie. “Mike’s

leaning on the contacts he made out of Derry, Bill's poking around in England for any help, Bev and Ben are coming by maybe a few weeks from now, Stan's been hitting the occult bookstores in Atlanta from what I hear."

Richie taps his fingers lightly against the line of Eddie's index finger. "But you came all the way out here to Derry," he says, quietly.

"I'm the only one who could afford to," says Eddie. "I told you that already." Stan will only come to Derry, Richie's certain, with *all* the other Losers. And the other Losers were never all that enthusiastic about going back to their childhood hometown. He's glad they're not here, not yet—Ben and Mike have already seen him like this, pale and scared and halfway to gone. Bev's already seen him in dreams once, and even she couldn't pull him out of the darkness in time. Out of dreams, it's hard to tell if she'd been a beat too slow, if she hadn't moved at all, if she'd stared in stunned horror instead as It pulled him into the bathtub, into the pipes.

Here, outside of Its influence, it's easier to remember the truth: she'd reached into the bathtub to try and save him. Her fingers had brushed against his, and It had tried to haul her in too, crooning about her being Daddy's little girl.

Richie'd done the only thing he could think of: he slapped her hand away and let the blood take him.

He should've done the same for Eddie. The problem is that he's always been a sucker for Eddie Kaspbrak. The problem is that he's selfish, and scared, and Eddie is looking at him like maybe he can be saved, after all. Like Richie isn't dead already, just animated by a clown ghost that wants to keep on eating children.

Isn't that sad.

"But I think," Eddie says, pulling Richie out of his thoughts, "it won't be too long before we all do get together. I know it. I don't know how I know, but I know it."

And Richie can't even argue with that. He can hear the countdown ticking in the back of his mind, the seconds till all the Losers are back

in Derry falling away with each tick. It's unavoidable, inevitable, one day all the Losers will be back in town and then—well, what will It do, then? What would Richie do, to keep them all safe, these people he loves more than himself?

He doesn't know. He really doesn't. He just knows that It wants them all here, wants to feast on them, and It wants to do it using Richie's fucking body.

"Stronger together," Richie murmurs, trying to convince himself. Eddie smiles, and squeezes his hand, and okay, maybe he does believe that, a little bit. Up here on a New York City rooftop, with the stars twinkling above them and the city sparkling below them, it's easy to believe anything.

"You know I used to love this city?" Eddie asks.

"*Really*," says Richie.

"Yeah, before I met Myra," says Eddie. "I mean, it was smoggy and shitty even then, but I was high off independence and it was the first big city I ever lived in. After I graduated and we got married, though," and he trails off, then shrugs. "She knew a lot of crime statistics," he says. "Especially about my neighborhood. And—I know it was fucked up, looking back, I know what we had wasn't really love, but when you're used to something, even when it's bad for you, you don't actually—you don't want to lose it. You don't want to find out who you are without it." He looks down at their joined hands, and says, "So we moved in together, and I got a steady job, and for over a decade I suffocated and didn't even know it."

Richie thinks of LA, of the bright lights that had blinded him when he first came there, with stars in his eyes and a dream. "I think I get it," he says. "I mean, obviously, not in a relationship, but—I get it. About the city. About being used to something even when it's fucked up as all hell." Like being a forty-year-old closet case even in the year 2016, even when it's easier now to be gay than it had been in 1989, or even 2006. At some point it had become far, far easier to stay there than to come out, and now—well, here he is. Dead and possessed, sick like his Aunt Christine used to say about *those poor homosexuals*, clucking her tongue. Dead like so many others, but his

name won't be going on any quilts.

Eddie doesn't ask, thankfully. There are things neither of them can say, not unless they're on the brink of death, and Richie already told him his big secret, there's nothing left. Now they're here, on the edge of something, feet dangling out into thin air, but in no hurry to jump. Richie doesn't need them to jump, right now, he knows what Eddie wants to say—in every squeeze of Eddie's hand, in every touch, in every word.

Does he want Eddie to say it back? Well. Yeah. It's been a fantasy since Richie was thirteen to hear Eddie say it back. But it's *Eddie's* choice, and Richie's not going to push him, especially not now when they both know Eddie could do way better than an undead closet case in a sewer with a demon clown in his head.

"How's the new job?" Richie asks, instead, and Eddie groans, throwing his head back. "Oh, that bad, huh?"

"The *repair budget* alone," Eddie says, helplessly. "Bowers broke through a fucking window and kicked over a bunch of shit and dragged that goddamn knife along walls, not to mention the legal fees. I'm half-tempted to bring him back to kill him myself, since what in the *fuck* was the point of fucking up the library? Now we have to shell out more money than we can afford because of all the fucking budget cuts!"

"What in the fuck was the point of fucking up Ben?" Richie says, dryly. "Bowers was a psycho and a bully. I guarantee you, fucking shit up gave him a sick, sick joy. Especially if that shit belonged to us Losers. It—*liked* him, for that. Pushed him in deeper." And he knows this is true, he realizes, deep in his bones, the way he didn't before It started rooming with him in his own brain. Jesus. "Don't ask me how I know that, I'll puke," he adds, rubbing a hand over his eyes.

"Duly noted, I won't," says Eddie, looking a little green around the gills himself. But he hasn't let go of Richie's hand. "But no, seriously, there are *so many budget cuts*, and for what? For *what*? We're not even on a shoestring budget! We're on a—Fuck, we're on a budget made of *threads*, the shitty kind that's gonna snap at any moment! Half the staff is made of interns and volunteers because we can't afford to pay

more people, I got blindingly lucky Mike put in a good word for me, and I'm doing more work than I can be paid for because the Financial Services department is just, like, four people! Including me! And I might be the only one even halfway qualified! We have an intern who can barely understand Microsoft Excel!"

"Oh my god," says Richie. "Did Mike leave a mess behind or something?"

"Surprisingly no," says Eddie. "Apparently he smoothed the transition of power as much as possible and made some headway towards improving things before he left. What this is? Is the *best-case scenario*, it could be so, so much worse than it is." He massages his temples and gives an unhappy grunting noise, shaking his head as if he can't believe the sheer fucked-upness of the financial situation he's handling. "I'm writing up a proposal Cathy can take to the mayor, this is insane. Where are the tax funds even going? Fucking *Derry*."

Affection blooms in the center of Richie's chest, a warmth that spreads in tingles under his skin. God, he loves this man. He loves him so much he's listening to this rant about libraries and funding and budgets, boring as it would've been to Richie before he died. "Ooh, keep talking budgets to me, Eds, you're really getting me going here," he says.

"Fuck off, Rich, this is actually a real problem," huffs Eddie. "The latest editions of the encyclopedia here are from *2011*. Five years out of date! Lots of things have happened in five years!"

"Don't you have computers?" Richie asks.

"Bowers broke our wi-fi router," says Eddie, darkly.

"That motherfucker," says Richie.

"*I know*," says Eddie, and continues to rant about the budget, about the system, about the repairs and the improvements and how much they'll all cost, his hand slicing through the air as he talks, the way it used to when they were kids and Eddie got all worked up about something. Richie leans back onto his palms, and basks in this: the sound of Eddie's voice, the feel of his hand in Richie's, the stars

shining down on them.

Above them, he thinks he can see the shape of a turtle swim past.

4. a little light is breaking through

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from Lewis Watson's "Little Light".

content warnings: Pennywise being a creep and referencing Bev's canonically abusive father. mentions of suicide attempt from Stan. vague allusions to Richie being willing to die if that's what it takes, which can be taken as suicidal ideation.

Sadly, when Ben and Bev show up the next week after that disaster of a first date, they don't bring their dog along.

"It's not safe for her in Derry," Bev points out, and, with a hand on Eddie's so he doesn't bristle at her, "she'll run after anything, Eddie, and there are dangers outside the sewers." *Too*, she doesn't say, and he relaxes, because—well, Richie's not a danger. Eddie's made sure, has been supplying him with fast food and candy bars, bacon and hot dogs, and in turn Richie's been doing okay. Not *great*, and some days are worse than others, a few he doesn't talk to Eddie at all, but most of the time he's okay.

Eddie takes Ben with him to walk around the town, and buys an order of fried chicken from the local McDonald's. He walks up to the storm drain with the box in hand, crouches down, and says, "Hey, Rich, Ben's here. Also, I got you fried chicken and tissues, wipe the sewer goop off your hands before you start eating."

"It's cute you think I'll get sick off dirty hands when I'm already dead," Richie says from the sewers, and he leans forward now. It's hard to see his face in the dim light, and Eddie hasn't been able to clearly see Richie's face outside of dreams in a while, but if Eddie were to judge, he'd say Richie looks fine. A little gaunt, and sometimes Eddie catches sight of white patches of makeup on his skin, but today he looks a little more like himself than he did yesterday. "Undead? I don't know."

"I think you'd qualify as undead," says Ben, frowning a little. He

crouches down beside Eddie, and Eddie takes a moment to wonder what they must look like to someone passing by: two grown men, talking to the storm drain. Then he decides, eh, fuck it. It's Derry. They've seen crazier shit. "Uh. You okay, Rich?"

"I haven't eaten anyone yet," says Richie. "Other than that, *hoo-ee*, Haystack, it's been shit. It's been trying to turn into different fears, but I'm keeping it stuck with me, as much as I can." There's a pause, during which Eddie figures he probably shrugs. "It takes a form, it has to follow the form's rules. And I make it a rule not to eat people, so."

"That's—actually not a bad plan," says Ben.

"Yeah, but I gotta be constantly fucking vigilant," says Richie. "And I still gotta eat."

"So the chicken," says Eddie, passing the food over. Richie's hands dart out of the darkness and pull the food into the sewer, and Eddie uneasily notes the patches of white on his skin, spreading like rashes from poison ivy. "And the burgers. And all the fast food—which, you're welcome, by the way, I've never walked into more fast food restaurants before in my life than I have lately."

"We all gotta make sacrifices, Eds," says Richie. "Anyway, I think it's working? Or at least I'm not fucking starving most of the time."

Ben looks at Eddie, like he's figuring something out. "Eddie, you think it's working?" he asks.

"Well, yeah," says Eddie, raising an eyebrow.

"Then it's working," says Ben, which is—a strange thing to say, honestly. But in Derry, where thinking makes something so, it also makes perfect sense. "But also—does it have to be you? Do you have to sit by the storm drain the whole time? You could just drop the food off, or ask someone else to drop the food off."

"I don't know anyone in this town now," Eddie points out. "I'm not asking the interns to drop food off at the sewers, are you kidding me, they're fucking *idiots*."

"They're teenagers," Richie reminds him.

"*Idiots*," Eddie reiterates. "And I want to talk with Richie, and because of this shit it's either this or dreams."

"Be nice to the teenagers, Eddie," says Ben, which, of course he'd say that. "I don't know, I just—after It, I thought you'd steer clear of sewers more. And, no offense, Rich, but if I got possessed by a murderous alien clown, I would not want Bev near any sewers. I'd miss her, but if I were possessed and she was near, it—probably wouldn't be pretty." *I know*, he doesn't say, but it's there in his words, in the parallels he's drawing between Eddie and Bev. Eddie knows, if Ben and Richie's positions were reversed, if *Ben* were the one down there and not Richie, Eddie'd be worried for Bev too.

He can't help but bristle anyway. "Listen—" he starts.

"Eh, none taken," says Richie, "but also, who else is going to fight me about hand wipes? Not a fucking intern who doesn't know their way around Excel, that's for sure. Definitely not Cathy."

"Wait, Cathy Jamison?" Ben asks. "Little girl who wanted a pony? I remember her."

"Yeah, lemme tell you, it's fuckin' weird talking to her now and remembering she used to try and make Richie give her rides," Eddie says, massaging his temples. "He had the worst growth spurt, and she was, what, four, five?"

"I think she fucked up my spine for a while there, the kid was heavy as fuck," Richie speculates from the sewer. "It's weird that you're working for her now."

"Officially," Eddie says. "Unofficially I'm the library's budget guy now. They have to screen shit through me." He shrugs. "I mean, Cathy still gets final say, and she has the right to overrule me, but she usually doesn't."

"You come off like a sensible person," Ben points out. "Talking to Richie in storm drains aside."

"I said that already and he said nobody in Derry would notice shit,"

says Richie.

“And they haven’t,” Eddie says.

Ben cocks his head to the side. “Is it because of you?” he asks. “It made people look the other way. You’re possessed by It right now, are you doing that?”

“Fuck, I dunno,” says Richie. “I’m new to weird clown magic, Haystack, I have no idea how any of it works. I could be doing it and I’d have no real clue.” He leans forward, and Eddie catches a glint of light off Richie’s glasses, one lens still cracked. “And before you ask I don’t actually give enough of a fuck about the weird clown magic to do more with it. I—” He hesitates, and says, “I mean, yeah, it would be fuckin’ cool, I’m not gonna lie. But what’s the cost? What’s the price? What else is It going to take from me?”

“What else?” Ben asks, frowning.

Richie hesitates, for just a heartbeat too long. Like he’s trying to keep something back, pretending to be okay. “Yeah, ‘cause It already killed me,” he says. “It’s gonna have to get creative, and I do not want firsthand experience at just how creative it can get. I already—I have a fucking *chest hole*.”

“Which you should probably get disinfected at some point,” Eddie mutters.

“Eddie, I’m dead and live in the sewers, disinfecting the gaping hole in my chest is the least of my problems,” says Richie.

“We don’t know if it’s going to stay once we get you back,” says Eddie. *Once we get you back*, not *if*, because that much is a certainty, and Ben’s nod affirms that belief. They are not losing another Loser. They are absolutely not losing Richie to It again. “And considering how long you’ve spent in close contact with fucking grey water and shit, it’s probably going to be infected.”

“If it stays when you get me back I’m fucking dead,” says Richie, sounding bitter and resigned. “But—well, like you said, we don’t know. Derry magic does whatever it wants, I just try to float with it.”

Eddie winces. Beside him, Ben's eyebrows draw together in a pained way, and he says, "That's—maybe not the best word choice, Rich."

"...fuck, you're right," says Richie, after a moment. "*Shit*. I didn't even think about it until you said it."

Mike's voice whispers in the back of Eddie's head, just then: *It's had time to subtly influence his way of thinking*. How long has Richie been down here? How long has Richie been conscious and undead, and aware of his unwanted passenger? Eddie doesn't know, doesn't think he wants to even ask. How aware is Richie of It influencing him, beyond just the obvious shifting?

Eddie reaches out a hand towards the sewer, unthinking, before Ben can react. There's only the briefest brush of something cold and clammy against his skin before he hears the sound of a foot splashing back through water. "You should really take Ben's advice, Eds," says Richie, sounding—*scared*. "Stop putting your hands in sewers. You don't know what you'll find down here."

Ben doesn't say anything, but his eyes are on Eddie, and there's something like understanding behind them. Like if it were Bev down there, Eddie couldn't stop him either from doing this stupid shit, even knowing what could happen.

"I know what I'll find down there, asshole," says Eddie, making a show of wiping his hand off on his shirt. "Germs and grey water and piss and shit, and one shithead with a giant fucking forehead and a gaping chest hole he *won't fix*."

Richie laughs, from the sewer. Ben flinches back, almost instinctively, but relaxes, as if reminding himself who's in the sewer this time. Eddie reaches for his hand and squeezes, reassuringly, once before letting go.

He gets it, is the thing. Pennywise's laughter is scored into his memory, the soundtrack of his worst nightmares. It slobbered and giggled when it loomed over a thirteen-year-old Eddie, one eye always fixed somewhere else, like it was watching someone else, like it was performing. The horrible sound of that laughter's going to stay.

But Richie doesn't laugh like that. He sounds almost relieved, even, that he can still laugh. Eddie doesn't manage to suppress his smile in time, and even places his hand as close to the storm drain as he can get, palm flat against the concrete.

"I'll think about it," Richie says. "Ben, tell me about—fuck, I don't know. Buildings. Bev. How you got so hot and won the reunion."

Ben coughs, and says, "I, uh—do you know the new Riverside Studios? The one the BBC's using now for filming?"

Eddie squints at him. "No?" he ventures.

"Oh, yeah, I did a bit about that one," says Richie, sounding almost wistful. That's right. He'd been a comedian, he'd peddled shitty jokes to people and seemed to thrive on their attention onstage. "All those aerial shots looked like a dick, so I. *May* have made some assumptions about your dick size. Sorry. I know now that it's probably way bigger than I thought if Bev—"

"Please shut up, Richie," Eddie mutters.

"Yeah, well, you're hardly the first person to," says Ben, dry as dust, but he smiles. "Beep beep, Trashmouth. But yeah, I'm the one who did that, and I swear to you I didn't think the layout would look so phallic until the Internet jumped on it." He leans back on his palms now, says, "I was really thinking in terms of—open spaces, you know? Ease of access for disabled persons, big enough hallways to walk and talk, transparency. Knocking down walls so it'd feel less claustrophobic and more like a place to socialize."

"Did it work?" Eddie asks. God, he kind of wishes Ben had designed his old job's building. After Derry, the damn place felt almost suffocating, all the time, so many people crammed into stainless steel walls, so many of them looking at Eddie and not seeing how much he was hurting until it was too late. Maybe if Ben had designed the building...

"Yeah," says Ben, with a little proud smile. Eddie remembers that same smile shining out of Ben's face, almost thirty years ago, as the seven of them climbed down into their clubhouse.

"Well, now I wanna go there," Richie pipes up. "Sounds like a fancy clubhouse."

"Kinda is," says Ben. "Just with more cameras around. You'd love it, especially for Red Nose Day. They invite a lot of comedians around then."

"If I ever get out of this town," says Richie, wistfully, "I might check it out." *If*. "How's Bev?" he asks, and Eddie graciously doesn't call him out on the poor attempt at changing the subject.

"She's doing fine," Ben says. "She's divorcing her husband, but she's trying to get her designs back from him. A lot of the company's rallied behind her, thank god, and her lawyers are *damn* good, but it's an uphill battle that she's fighting. That *we're* fighting," he corrects. "Well. Mostly she's fighting it, I massage her feet when she comes home."

"The lucky little shithead," Richie says.

"Which one?" Eddie asks.

"Bev, duh," says Richie. "Although Ben got lucky too because she grew up insanely attractive and successful, I guess."

"Thanks," says Ben. "We've been insanely lucky, finding each other again." He fidgets a little, looks down at his hands and rubs a thumb absently over the base of his ring finger. "Still, sometimes I just—I want her to be happy, y'know? She deserves to be. But I don't know if it's with me she'll find that happiness with."

"Are you asking for relationship advice," says Eddie, slowly, "from the recent divorcee and the sewer-dwelling pisswater-covered bachelor?"

"You've hit rock bottom," Richie informs Ben. "Just in terms of who you're getting your relationship advice from. Why not ask Bill?"

"Bill's not here," Ben points out. "And I am going to ask him, and Stan."

"Aren't you going to ask Bev?" Eddie asks, and Ben pauses for a

moment. "Since it is her happiness we're talking about here." He rubs a thumb over the space where his wedding band used to be, and thinks—he and Myra were doomed from the start, really, now that he's looking back with clearer eyes. But the inability to really *communicate* never helped. "You should talk to her," he says, stronger now.

Ben doesn't say anything, but he looks at Eddie as if Eddie's just cleared away a cloud, and now he's looking at something more clearly than he ever has before. "You're not wrong," he says, finally. "I can ask her. I know she wants her designs back, wants to start over, but after that—I didn't know what."

"Well, she does, at least, if you guys bought a damn dog," says Richie. Eddie looks down towards the sewers, and sees only the faintest movement in the darkness. "What? I do a lot of eavesdropping. Not a whole lot else to fucking do."

"You better not be eavesdropping in the middle of—" Eddie starts.

Ben blushes crimson, and buries his face in his hands. Eddie half-hears something that sounds vaguely like *the fucking fair all over again*, which, what is he even talking about?

"God, *no*," says Richie. "I have my limits. I do not want to know who you or anyone else in this town might be jacking off to."

"Thank you for the basic decency, Rich," Ben says, his voice muffled by his hands. "I'll talk to Bev and I won't tell her what you said about eavesdropping on people. Just, y'know."

"No eavesdropping on either of you while you're fucking, got it," says Richie.

"Or at all," says Ben.

"I *got it*, Jesus, who do you think I am," Richie huffs, "the fucking CIA or some shit?" There's a sigh, and he says, "Just—I tried to talk to Bev and Stan, besides Eddie, but I kept getting cut off from Bev every time and Stan's too fucking far, the weird sewer clown magic's not getting any signal from Atlanta. I need you guys to relay a message

for me.”

“Yeah,” says Eddie. “Of course, Rich, what do you need?”

“Ask them about the Deadlights,” Richie says. “Whatever they know. Maybe work with Mike about it, he’s got the research shit down and they’re the ones with the firsthand experience, and, well.” He leans forward, fingers peeking out of the pavement, and Eddie’s stomach roils at the sight of faded white paint on Richie’s skin. As he watches, Richie scratches over a bloom of stark white paint over a knuckle, as if trying to rub it away. “Ben, you said earlier that if it were you in my place, you wouldn’t want Bev near the sewers. Actually? She’d maybe be the safest out of all of us, as long as I’m still alive.”

“What are you talking about?” Ben asks, frowning. He looks so much like the chubby little nerd Eddie knew as a kid when he does that, god, Eddie’s a little thrown by the memory that bubbles up just then: Ben, at fourteen, making the same confused face at him and Richie during the Fourth of July festival. They’d gotten so caught up in their bickering that time that they had completely ignored Ben for ten whole minutes.

...huh, so that’s what the comment about the fair was about. Eddie resists the urge to flick Ben’s (stupidly toned) bicep for that, now.

“It doesn’t like using the Deadlights,” Richie says, his tone distant, like he’s recalling something he doesn’t particularly like. Except this isn’t *his* memory, Eddie realizes, but *Its*. “Sours the meat, apparently. But the people who see the Deadlights, who get away from It—they’re, I don’t know, marked as potential hosts for It? If ever It dies, and they’re in range. And, well, I was the last poor bastard it floated with the Deadlights, and my body was in range.”

“So if we somehow exorcise It from you,” Ben says, “we have to make sure to, what, really destroy it? So it doesn’t possess Bev or Stan.”

“...yeah, sure, let’s go with exorcising It,” says Richie.

“Of course we’re going to exorcise It,” says Eddie. “We’ve been over this.”

Richie just hums in answer, *mm-hmm, sure*. Like he doesn't completely believe it himself, and Eddie wants to shake him for that. Wants to bundle him up in a car and take him to a therapist because, *Jesus, Richie, are you okay?* "Yeah, you need to put out the lights," says Richie. "I don't know how, but I think if you put out the lights then It's gone for good. But in the meantime, It's not gonna try to eat Bev. Or Stan."

"Still gonna try to kill them, though," says Eddie.

"Yeah, easier to force your way into someone's head when they're in no position to consent," says Richie. "Tell Bev and Stan that: they're not on the menu, but they're on the real estate listing for clown ghosts that want a new body."

"Duly noted," says Ben, massaging his temples. "Anything else you want to say?"

"Tell Bev to keep a line open for me," says Richie, sounding almost sad before his voice shifts, growing deeper and more coaxing as white paint wraps around his fingers like ribbons, "**ask her if *she's still daddy's little girl, he missed her so much, is she hanging around with those boys again—fuck! No, no no no—I have to go, I'm sorry, I need to go.***"

"No, Richie, *wait—*" Eddie starts, almost reaching into the sewer before Ben grabs him by the collar of his shirt and drags him back. "You can't just *go—*"

"You're not *safe*," says Richie, then, "I'm not—I'm not safe, not right now, fuck—I'll talk to you again, just not now, but I need to go, Eddie. I'm not," and his voice cracks, "*safe*. I'm sorry."

"Rich," says Eddie, urgently, trying to pull away from Ben's grasp, "Richie, fuck, *Richie*, you can't just—"

"He's gone," says Ben, quietly, letting go of Eddie then. "Eddie, he's not talking." He nods to the sewer and says, "You heard him. You heard *It*, for a moment. We both did."

"What," Eddie scoffs, "are you scared of Richie now or something?"

"No," Ben says. "Richie's the least scary person I know. But I'm scared *for* you."

Eddie can't help it. He bristles at that, because people being scared for him have never ended well, historically, for anyone. Especially not Eddie. "I'm fine," he says. "I'm careful. I wash my hands thoroughly—"

"It isn't that," says Ben. He looks at the sewer again, then at Eddie, and says, "You remember after—after Richie died, and we had to drag you away?"

(he needs his glasses he can't he can't see without his glasses let me go he's still alive we have to go back at least let me find his stupid fucking glasses he can't come back to us if he can't see where he's going he needs those glasses he's still down there he's fucking blind without them and he won't be able to find us we can't just leave—)

"Yeah," says Eddie, scrubbing at his eyes with the heel of his palm. "Yeah, I remember." He'd probably made Ben and Mike's injuries worse, fighting so hard to get back, but they had clung on anyway. "What does it have to do with this?"

Ben twists the hem of his shirt in his hand, and he looks so much now like the boy Eddie used to know that for a moment they're just kids again: a wheezy asthmatic and a fat (*big-boned*) boy, sitting together on a crisp autumn afternoon, coming up with answers for their shared English class. "We all mourned him," he says. "But yours was different."

The loss of Richie had changed Eddie, certainly—not completely, but grief changes people, grief not only for the dead but for the never-was. Eddie had taken a look at the half-life he'd lived before Derry and thought, *Richie's dead because he loved you enough to want you to stay alive more than he wanted to. Don't waste this chance.* So he hadn't, as much as it terrified him at the time. The grief had hollowed him out that the fear didn't quite register as much as it would've, with the memory of Richie's body lying against the cold, damp stone still fresh in his mind.

And then he dreamed of Richie, calling for help, and hope, for the

first time in a while, had bloomed like a flower in his chest. Somewhere under the fear, under the worry, some tiny selfish part of him thought *he can come back*, and hope had taken stubborn root in his heart, because what the fuck else does he have if not hope? What the fuck else does Richie have, if not hope?

“He did kinda confess his undying love,” says Eddie, weakly. “I was still reeling from that when he—I guess he called? Is that what we’re calling those now?”

“I mean, that’s one way to put it,” says Ben. “But you were this close to jumping right into the sewer after Richie.”

Eddie can’t dispute that. For one moment there, before Ben had grabbed the back of his collar and pulled him back, that same desperation from the cistern had taken over. *We have to go back.*

“We need you up here,” Ben’s saying, and Eddie can only listen. “*He* needs you up here, not down in the sewers with him.” He squeezes Eddie’s shoulder, gentle, reassuring. “I think he’d agree with me if he were here.”

“You wouldn’t be wrong,” Eddie admits. “I just—every time he walks away, I can’t help but think about all those dreams I had, before I came back here.” He rubs a hand over his elbow, and throws a glance at the sewer, at the darkness beyond it. “How much do you remember of those dreams?” he asks.

“Not a whole lot,” says Ben, shaking his head. “Just—the dream equivalent of white noise, I guess? Everything I saw in it was a blur, and I could barely hear a word Richie was saying. It was like someone’d stuffed my ears up with cotton.”

“I remember them a lot more clearly,” says Eddie. “There was this darkness behind him, and every time, something would pull him back into the dark. A hand, or the leper, or—or kids’ hands. *It.*” He pulls a knee up to his chest, and says, “He screamed. That’s what I keep remembering. That first dream, when It dragged him into the sewer, he was screaming the whole time.” He breathes out slow, the memory bubbling up: Richie, scrabbling at the pavement, trying to stay out in the light, reaching for Eddie. His nails had left bloody

scratches in the stone. "I don't know what It's doing to him, down there," says Eddie now. "But whatever it is, it's hurting him."

"We'll get him out," says Ben.

"I know that," says Eddie. "I believe that. I'm just not a huge fan of how long it's taking."

"Neither am I," says Ben. "It's *Richie* down there, no one is."

Cold comfort, that, but he'll take it for now.

--

"Keep a line open, huh?" Bev says, on the second day, as she and Eddie walk down the street. "I can try, but he's going to have to figure out a way to help it *stay* open."

"I mean," Eddie starts, thoughtfully, fishing the arcade token out from under his clothes, rubbing a thumb over the half-melted visage, "he did with me, I could ask him. Or..." He stops, then squints down the street. If they go left, and then take a right three blocks down, cutting through an alleyway as a shortcut, then cross the street, they'll be right in front of the Capitol Theater. "He got this from the Capitol," he says. "Can't hurt to see if it'll work for us."

So they trudge down to the Capitol. It's all boarded up now, the letters on the marquee reading "TH NKS F R TH M MOR ES DERRY," and the vandals have long since left their mark on the place: Eddie can see spray painted slogans and tags on the walls, shattered windows where someone must've broken in. Conveniently, there's a big enough hole in the glass of the doors for Bev to slip her hand through and open the place up from the inside.

Eddie steps into the arcade, and covers his mouth and nose with his shirt. "Fuck, how long has this place been abandoned?" he asks.

"I don't know, I moved out first before the rest of you," says Bev, looking around. She smiles, and says, "Hey, Eddie, look—the photobooth's still there."

Eddie can't help the smile that spreads across his face, at the sight of

the old booth. They'd all crammed in, the seven of them, with Eddie leading the way, and pulled faces at the camera, giggling all the while. Later, they each claimed strips of photos, wanting a memory of this perfect day. Eddie knows Mike kept his as a bookmark.

He—doesn't know where his strip went. Must've been thrown out, one day, or Myra must be unknowingly keeping it, because who's going to notice a little slip of photo paper, right?

Eddie's heart wrenches.

Bev doesn't say anything. She just takes his hand and squeezes, reassuringly, before letting go and turning to the token dispenser.

Eddie drifts closer to the old Street Fighter machine. God, he and Richie used to play this all the time, he remembers that now—they'd fight over who got Ken and who got Ryu, and they used to shove into each other's sides to throw the other off his game. Now he pushes at a joystick, and it stays pushed, bent in the new position. "Hey," he says, to no one in particular, "shithead. Are you here?"

No response.

"We're getting Bev a token," says Eddie, because, well, it's only polite. "So you can talk to her without your chaperone trying to bust your ass. I'm—not completely sure how that works, but I think this is the right thing to do." He taps his fingers against the console, and says, "We could get Stan one too. He'd want to hear from you, preferably without the screaming and the darkness."

Still no answer. Eddie huffs out a breath.

Metal clatters. Bev pockets the arcade token, and says, "Okay, I got it, what do I do?"

"I wear mine as a necklace," says Eddie. "Make it jewelry? It's gotta be in contact with your skin." He doesn't know how he knows this, but—it feels right, that the token should be tucked under his clothes, pressed up against his chest. "I've got some leftover crafts supplies, I can probably—"

There's the sound of a camera flashing, and Bev and Eddie whip

around towards the photobooth. The curtain flutters, invitingly. Bev steps in front of Eddie, clutching the token in her hand, and all Eddie can do is follow behind her, praying that what's behind the curtain is just Richie and not—*It*.

Bev has always been the bravest of all of them. She's still the one who stabbed Pennywise through the eye when they were thirteen and shitting their pants, still the one who jumped off the cliff first and showed them all up. It makes sense that she's the one to reach out and push the curtain aside, ready to fight whatever comes out at them.

There's nothing there.

Well, not nothing, anyway. There's a message scrawled onto the back of the photobooth, in lipstick: *GET ONE FOR STAN TOO*.

"Motherfucker," says Eddie, breathing out a sigh of relief, "I almost had a *heart attack*."

Bev's eyes are shining and wet, but her mouth turns upwards in a small, sad smile. "We will," she says, to Richie.

They get another token, for Stan this time, and leave the arcade behind. Well, mostly.

Eddie stops when he passes the Street Fighter machine, and blinks at the flickering screen. For a moment, he thinks he can almost see the imprint of a hand pressed to the inside of the screen.

"Eddie?" Bev calls, already pushing the door open.

"Coming," Eddie answers, and pulls away.

--

When Stan calls Eddie, a few days after Ben and Beverly leave, he says, "Thanks for the token. I saw him."

Eddie, in the middle of deep-cleaning one of the bedrooms in a sleepless frenzy (because it's that or return to the nightmare of Richie dying, of the leper sticking Its tongue in Richie's throat to drag his

dead body back into shuddering, screaming life), sticks Stan on speakerphone and says, "Talk louder, I can't hear you, I'm *vacuuming*."

"Knew it," Stan sighs. "I saw him. He looked—way better than he should have, considering he's possessed by fucking Pennywise."

"Yeah, well, you didn't see him before you got the token," says Eddie, shuddering at the memory of Richie, pale and gaunt, white paint blooming across his arms like bruises, at the memory of how those dreams ended. He prefers dreaming of New York and of California, to that. "How was it?"

"He told me about the Deadlights," says Stan. "So, yeah, priority number one, if—*when* I come back to Derry: not dying and not getting possessed by a demon clown from outer space." There's a beat, then the sound of Stan's head thudding against the desk. "It doesn't make *sense*," he says, sounding more annoyed and offended than afraid. That was always Stanley, the sort of person who liked things in order, who'd take the time to push down the kickstand on his bike while the rest let their bikes clatter to the ground. "We killed It, it's supposed to be *over*, we weren't supposed to deal with this ghost bullshit."

Eddie lifts up a corner of the carpet and pushes the vacuum underneath, and says, "It's a shapeshifting monster from beyond our reality, It plays by different rules. We figured some out, we know we can bully it to death, but the rest we're playing by ear. And at least this time we have Richie on the inside!" Even as he says it, he winces, because—yeah, no. That's not really a good thing, not for Richie, not for anyone. "We are going to kill It for good," he says. "We're going to do it right. And we'll get Richie out while we're at it."

"The ritual Mike found didn't work, and that took twenty-seven years," Stan says. "What do you plan to do? Where are you going to start? How long does Richie have left?"

"I don't know what to say to all of those," Eddie sighs, letting the carpet drop and turning the vacuum off. The floor's as clean as it's going to get with the vacuum, so Eddie pulls on a surgical mask and gloves, and starts digging through his supplies for the wood cleaner

and rags. “I picked up some of Mike’s books, but like I said, I don’t know where to start. I’ll call Mike when I’m done cleaning this room.” How long Richie has left is—not something Eddie particularly wants to think about, right now.

“Which room are you cleaning?”

“My old room,” says Eddie. “The one where I got stabbed in the bathroom.”

“I thought they cleaned the bloodstains out,” says Stan.

“They did,” Eddie admits. “I just—needed something to do, that’s all.”

Stan doesn’t say anything for a long time, and Eddie half-thinks he’s hung up on him when Stan breaks the silence with, “I used to have nightmares about the Deadlights. A lot of the time I couldn’t get back to sleep, I was too scared to. Even when we moved out, I’d still—I’d have these dreams, these *visions*, that scared me so much I could barely sleep. So instead I just...did something else, instead.” There’s a soft huff of laughter on the other side, and Stan says, “Patty keeps finding me organizing our sock drawers in the dead of night. I never really told her why until after Derry. You know, she’s usually a pretty organized woman herself, but sometimes when I wake up and I have to do something the socks are mysteriously *disorganized*, and I actually—feel better. Strange, right?”

“What, she messes up your socks on purpose and you’re okay with that?” Eddie asks. “Stan, is that really you or am I talking to a pod person right now?”

“Fucking let me finish, Eddie,” says Stan, a note of irritation seeping into his tone. God. Eddie’s missed him. “Just—you don’t have to bear this alone, you know? If you have nightmares, if you can’t sleep? There’s six other people you can talk to. We’ll do what we can.”

Six. Including Richie.

“I’ll think about it,” Eddie promises. “But I really do have to clean this place up, Stan, it’s a total fucking mess. I think there’s *bedbugs*.”

"There's a cleaning service in Derry, I know that, I checked," says Stan.

"They have four two-star reviews!" Eddie says. "I'll just do it myself. I *am* doing it myself." He spreads the polish out onto the floor, careful and methodical. "What—Okay, tell me to fuck off if I'm prying, but what else did you guys talk about?"

There's a silence on the other end of the line. Eddie imagines Stan rolling his eyes heavenward, and sure enough, he hears Stan heave a long-suffering sigh. "We caught each other up," Stan says. "And he did talk a lot about you. Seemed pretty happy, actually, so I guess you both managed to get your shit together?"

Eddie says, "Sort. Of?"

"*Sort of*," says Stan, his voice carefully flat as if he's trying to contain his incredulity.

"I know he loves me," says Eddie, "he fucking used his last words for a heartfelt confession, and I—can't even say it back." He huffs out a laugh through his mask, and pushes the rag across the floor a little harder than he maybe should. "Months ago I didn't even know I *swung* that way, fuck. It's fucked up, right?"

"Without the context of Derry, yeah," says Stan, "but then Derry fucked all of us up, Eddie. Even the ones who left."

"Not you, though," says Eddie.

"I almost killed myself so I wouldn't have to go back to Derry," Stan points out, which, fair, but also, did he really have to bring that up again. "I'm not a great yardstick. My point is: as bizarre and surreal as this situation is, I'm happy for you guys. I really am. Just—" He hesitates.

"Just what?" Eddie asks.

"Be careful," says Stan. "I trust Richie with my life and yours, but It is a wholly different story. And you never know who might be in charge, sometimes."

5. how will i let you slip through?

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from Local Natives' "When Am I Gonna Lose You".

content warning: canon-typical horror, no real gore though. two homophobic Derry citizens follow Eddie in the last section of the chapter with malicious intent but get scared off by Richie slowly turning into a rotting, waterlogged corpse version of Adrian Mellon. It Ruins Richie's Entire Day Again.

The Falcon, as Eddie recalls, did not start out as a gay bar. In truth it started out as an ordinary bar, but Elmer Curtie did not ask questions, and neither did his employees, and soon enough Derry's hidden LGBT community started to come around more often. Nowadays, it's still not overtly a gay bar—no rainbow Pride flags, no neon lights, no real indication that most of its customers are queer in one way or another—but there's something of an understanding around town.

Eddie ducks into the Falcon by accident, really, a few days after Stan's phone call. He doesn't even realize where it is he's hurriedly slipped into out of the rain, clutching one of Mike's books protectively to his chest, until he catches sight of Adrian Mellon's face on the wall. *Beloved Patron*, the plaque underneath reads, simply, and there are roses underneath the portrait. *Gone but Not Forgotten*.

Poor fucking kid. Eddie stands there in front of the portrait a moment, wondering what to do next, before he sighs and says, "I'm sorry."

There's really not much else he can do. Mellon's dead and gone, and even Eddie's apology (*for what? for not killing the clown right, both times? the clown might've killed him but the beating didn't fucking help*) won't help him, wherever he's gone. All he can do is nod, respectfully, to the portrait, and then continue onto the counter for a drink.

The whole time, he tries not to look anyone in the eye. In the back of his head, he can hear his mother howling, *you'll get sick Eddie don't go near them you'll get AIDS like they do in New York and you'll waste away and die and leave me alone—*

Except.

Except he's not dead.

So, hah.

He sucks in a breath and straightens up his spine, still clutching the book close to him. He pulls out a bar stool and flags the bartender down, ordering just a lemonade to wait out the rain, then opens the book and starts to read. He only looks up briefly to catch a glimpse of his lemonade being deposited in front of him, and then goes back to reading.

A bar stool beside him scrapes backward. An Scottish voice says, "Well, I've seen some things around, but I've never seen a man bring a book into a gay bar before."

Eddie's breath catches in his throat. "Richie?" he asks, looking up to see—a young man with dark skin and dyed-blond hair, smiling impishly at Eddie, back against the counter. Not Richie, who used to have a god-awful Scottish Voice when they were kids, one that got worse when he saw Highlander. "Sorry," Eddie says, sheepishly rubbing the back of his head.

"It's fine, big man," says the man. "It's Sean, actually. Are you waiting on someone?"

"Not really," says Eddie. "Just needed to come in out of the rain for a time."

"Ooh, yeah, it's fuckin' pissing rain out there," says Sean. "I don't blame you." He taps his fingers against the counter and says, so hopefully, "You know, my place has heating, and my boyfriend doesn't mind."

Eddie stares at him. "I'm—dating someone," he says, and almost unconsciously braces himself for the push, for the charm,

remembering all the things his mother used to say, all the things Myra used to whisper about in trepidatious, worried tones. (And *It*, too. *I'll blow you for free.*)

"Oh!" says Sean, snapping his fingers. "The mysterious Richie, then? Oof, 'm'sorry. Didn't realize."

"Yeah," says Eddie, relaxing a little. "Him."

"Well, I hope he comes 'round to pick you up soon," says Sean, squinting at the rain. "Gonna be rough gettin' home in this rain."

"Oh, no, he doesn't have a car," says Eddie, and technically, it's not really a lie. It's just not the whole truth either. "I'm walking back."

"Oh, that's safer once the rain's done," says Sean, leaning forward on his elbows to flag down the bartender for a screwdriver. "Hey, whatcha reading?"

Eddie shuts the book, tucks it into his jacket, and says, "Just—some light research, that's all. I, uh, I'm writing a book on Derry."

"Can't imagine there's a whole lot of interesting shite in Derry," says Sean, frowning, his fingers drumming against the bar counter. He looks young. God, he's probably younger than Mellon was. God, kids these days are braver than Eddie could ever hope to be, walking around with their hearts on their sleeves, proud and defiant, raising their middle fingers to a cold and cruel world and shouting *fuck you, we love who we love anyway*. Eddie's—well, Eddie's dating someone, but that someone is his undead best friend who's possessed by a flesh-eating sewer monster, and neither of them have really said the g-word out loud just yet. Nor has Eddie said the l-word. "Other than all the crime, I guess."

Eddie blinks at him. "What?" he asks.

"I mean, used to be the place was—fucking plagued with murders," Sean continues. "People would go missing a *lot*, it was like you couldn't go a week without two new missing posters being put up. Sometimes it got especially bad, and we wouldn't be allowed outside. I *definitely* wouldn't have gone out here, in those bad ol' days." He

huffs out a breath as the screwdriver's deposited in front of him, and takes a sip. "But something's changed. Shifted in the atmosphere."

"Oh?" Eddie asks, propping an elbow up on the counter. "What do you mean?"

Sean hesitates, then sighs. "I don't know," he admits, his Scottish brogue flitting in and out of existence as he speaks. "It just—It feels less suffocating? Less like it's trying to squeeze the life and soul out of you? But something about it...you know that feeling you get, when you're—you're watching a storm buildin' on the horizon? You're far enough away that you think it's gonna pass, but you're close enough that it just might not."

"Not really," Eddie admits. "I just check the weather app on my phone. But I get it, I think."

"Close enough," says Sean, dryly, and Eddie gets the feeling he's being judged, a little. Which, wow, this coming from the guy choosing to go with a metaphor about storm-watching in 2016. "There's a storm on the horizon. I don't know if it'll hit us, or if it'll miss us, but it's coming. I just—I know it in me bones, like my old grandma would say." He hunches in on himself, takes a sip of his screwdriver. "Don't ask me how to explain it. I just know it. And—one other thing."

"What other thing?"

Sean looks away and says, "This is gonna sound bloody insane, but I promise you that it's the truth. I *swear*, it happened the way I saw it, it looked like something out of a fairy tale. A really fucked-up one."

Eddie sits up, suddenly. *Richie*, he knows, deep in his bones, in the core of his very soul. The kid's talking about Richie. "I'll believe you," he says, and means every word. "I've seen some weird shit lately."

"Not as weird as this, I'll bet," says Sean. "Um. Okay. So it was just a couple of days ago, right..."

It was a fine autumn afternoon when Sean MacClery, or Sean Mac a' Cléirich if you wanted to torture yourself, saw the dead man in the Barrens.

His boyfriend Jonny had kicked him out of the apartment for the afternoon so he could have his fuckbuddy Eleanor over. Sean liked Eleanor, she had all kinds of fun gossip that he loved to hear and could bake like a motherfucker, but he and Jonny agreed that neither of them had a voyeurism kink and didn't particularly want to hear each other having sex with someone else if they weren't in the same bedroom. So Sean had kissed his cheek and reminded him to wear a damn condom, and then gone to the Barrens to start sketching.

The Barrens weren't actually *barren*, was the thing. Otherwise Sean would never have started going there for inspiration, because what fun was there in sketching a barren place, after all. No, the Barrens were lush and green, now turning shades of orange and red in the autumn, and more importantly the Barrens did not have people patrolling them to remove possible trespassers from the premises. It was perfect for Sean, who'd had a couple close calls this autumn with the authorities, and didn't feel like having any more of them. Derry police officers were rather racist, and Sean had no interest in becoming another statistic.

So the Barrens it was. And the Barrens were rapidly becoming his favorite place to visit, just because it was so interesting. Kids tended to play there quite a lot, so Sean sometimes tripped over the remnants of a childish fort, or the traces of a weekend afternoon well-spent, and he'd set up there to sketch a bit. Sometimes he sketched what was in front of him, and sometimes he'd sketch what he figured the kids were playing at that weekend before they left, with their toys and makeshift weapons in the dust.

Today he wandered a little farther than he usually went. He crossed the Kenduskeag while humming his mother's lullabies under his breath, and walked into the woods with his sketchbook under his arm. His mother used to warn him about fairy rings and the old ways of her ancestors, used to tell him never to go too far into the woods, but Derry didn't have fairy rings. Derry just had—

Well, Derry had *something*, but whatever it was, it wasn't there now.

Otherwise Sean wouldn't have gone this far, not with his mother's warnings about things best left undisturbed, not with his father once telling him, *there's something cursed about this town, so be careful*. But he didn't have to be careful now, he figured.

Leaves and twigs crunched and cracked under the soles of his boots. He stepped into a clearing and looked around, and grinned. "Mighty fine day today, folks," he murmured to himself, in his best Southern drawl. The Scottish still poked through, a consequence of spending half his childhood with his mother in Scotland after his parents got divorced, but he figured he did a passable enough job.

He sat down on a convenient rock, and looked up. The afternoon sun was peeking through the canopy, and the scene in front of him seemed almost like a storybook illustration: beams of autumn sunlight, streaming down to the forest floor. He almost expected an ethereal woman to walk out of the trees, although if she did, he'd have turned and fled. One did not fuck with the gentle folk.

Thankfully, there was no ethereal woman. Sean sketched her in anyway, picturing some actress he'd seen in that old movie, what was it, *The Black Rapids*? Something based off a William Denbrough novel, anyway. Man was having a Moment, this year, what with *The Attic Room* coming out soon and *Homecoming Queen* getting an adaptation. Jonny liked horror, might be Sean could preorder tickets to *Attic Room* and cuddle his boyfriend during the terrifying parts.

He didn't hear the sound of someone stepping on the leaves. He didn't even hear a breath, a whisper, anything that could indicate that anyone else was there. He only felt a prickle along the back of his neck before he looked up and sucked in a horrified breath.

There was a man stepping through the trees. He *looked* like a man, anyway, if one who was somewhat underfed, but his eyes seemed—strange, like they couldn't settle on a color for very long. One minute they seemed an eerie gold, the next they were blue. He was looking down, prodding the ground with his foot, as if looking for some secret trap door. And there was—

There was a gaping hole through the man's chest. He was *still bleeding*, sluggishly. And his *face*, god—splotches of white makeup

decorated his pale skin like bruises, and Sean could swear he could see, for just the briefest of moments, the outline of two red lines below the man's strange, sunken eyes. Something about the man—Sean wanted to run, but his legs were locked up, his pencil falling from nerveless fingers.

The man looked up, and blinked at him. Glasses. Cracked glasses. What sort of monster needed glasses to see? The man smiled, slowly, like a predator that had just found injured prey, and cocked his head to the side.

“well, well, well, what have we here? don’t you know you shouldn’t walk into the woods, young man?” the man said, stepping forward. ***“you don’t know what’s waiting for—oh my fucking god, no.”*** Then he froze, and the gold in his eyes flickered away. “Shit,” he said, and his voice was *different*, more human, a little nasal-sounding and imperfect. The smile had disappeared, the lazy grace of a predator had gone, and all that was left was a weirdly tall, kinda awkward guy who still had a fucking *hole* in his chest. “Shit, no, fuck, I’m sorry, man.”

“It,” Sean managed, staring at the hole in the guy’s chest and trying to process what the everliving *fuck* was happening in front of him. “It’s fine?”

“It’s not fucking fine,” the man snapped. “Get the fuck out of here.”

“I’m sorry, what?” Sean said, forgetting to be afraid. Fuck, why was he scared of this guy in the first place? He was just some lanky dumbass. *With a goddamn hole in his chest*, some part of Sean pointed out, *so, uh, probably a zombie*. “Hey, shithead, I got here *first*.”

“It doesn’t care about who got here first, kid,” said the man, scratching violently at his wrists, enough that Sean saw him bleeding a little more. With every scratch, though, white paint peeled away. “You gotta go. I’m—It’s fucking starving, and I can taste your fear from here, and I’m telling you, if you’re not gone in the next twenty seconds I can’t guarantee you’ll make it out of the Barrens alive.”

Sean’s blood ran cold. “You’re joking,” he said.

"If I was joking, I'd be talking about eating your mom out," said the man, peeved. "I'm not. You need to go, you're not safe here."

Sean stared at him, and thought, wildly and nonsensically, *This is Tam fucking Lin all over again*. "Listen, man, I don't want any trouble," he said, his Scottish brogue blurring the words together as he stood. He tugged off his jacket, tossed it to the ground at the man's feet, and said, "I know how this shit goes, here's your tribute, leave me alone —"

"what kind of story do you think this is?" the man said, in that horrible, awful scraping voice again. **"i think i'll have that pound of flesh instead."** Then he shook his head. **"I said** you need to fucking run," he said, dragging every word out from behind his teeth like it was taking every bit of strength he had to stay *still*, to not *move*. His shape was starting to change, going from a lanky, weird, too-pale white guy to something else, something thinner and sharper. "You have to go. I don't care about your tribute but you need to fucking leave."

"But—"

"Now," the man all but screamed, the howl of a banshee, and Sean booked it the fuck out of the Barrens.

He didn't look back until he'd crossed the river.

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"Fuck," breathes Eddie, after Sean finishes his story, and his drink. Richie had been acting strangely, a couple days ago, had asked that Eddie check the papers and Mike's old police scanner for any missing people lately, but he hadn't told him why. Now he knows. Or at least he has some idea. "That's..."

"You don't believe me," says Sean.

"I believe you," says Eddie. "I do. Can you—What else did you notice about him?"

Sean raises his eyebrows. "Besides the gaping hole in his chest that he should've been dead from?" he asks. "Ugh. I don't know. Uh, he

seemed a bit familiar?”

Because he's a missing comedian, Eddie doesn't say. "And you—tossed your jacket at him?" he asks instead. "Why?"

"That's how it works in my mother's stories," says Sean. "You give the Sith a tribute, and they leave you be. And this guy, he just—he gave me that vibe, for a moment? Of someone up there with the Sith, just more terrifying." He scratches at his cheek, and says, "But he said something about it not being that kind of story."

Since when has Pennywise cared about stories? Although—it must be something to do with Sean's fear. Eddie sips at his lemonade, and says, "What are the—uh—"

"Sith," Sean says, saying the word slower so Eddie can repeat after him, trying to familiarize himself with it. "They're fairies, essentially. Or—well, we understand them in the modern day as fairies, but they're more complicated than Tinkerbell waving a wee little wand. More terrifying, too." He huffs out a breath. "But they play by rules. This guy, I don't know, he didn't make any sense to me. He was talking to himself, and if it wasn't for the—the way his shape was changing, I think I would've just called the police on him, gotten them to take him to Juniper Hill."

"Thank god you didn't," Eddie mutters, because, well, *really*. He's heard horror stories about the asylum Henry Bowers broke out of, he does not want to imagine what it would look like if Richie, possessed by the ghost of It, got dragged there. If he even could be dragged anywhere. As long as he's in Derry, as long as the sewers are available to him, Eddie's pretty sure Richie would slip away fast from the asylum, but it'd take a toll. "Hey, uh—do you mind if I left my contact number with you? For follow-up questions."

"Oh, no, I don't," says Sean, brows scrunching together in confusion. "This is the weirdest context I've ever gotten a guy's number in, but sure."

They swap phone numbers, after that, and by the time the rain clears, Eddie has a new number in his phone, some leads on where to start, and a new worry worming its way under his skin. *Richie*, he thinks,

thumb rubbing over the arcade token hanging around his neck like a talisman, *tell me what's wrong. I can't help if you don't tell me.*

No response. Probably should've said it out loud, now that he thinks about it.

"Richie," he says, softly, when he steps out into the sunlight, kicking a pebble into the sewer to get Richie's attention, "we really gotta talk, man. Meet up with me in the townhouse basement?"

Still no answer, but Eddie sees a glint of light in the darkness.

"I'll take that as a nod," says Eddie.

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Eddie's halfway back to the townhouse when he realizes that someone's following him. A glance at a general store window confirms his suspicions: two guys, one who looks like he's barely out of high school and another who's definitely older, casually trying to seem like they're not watching Eddie like hawks. A cold stone of dread drops right into Eddie's gut.

There are dangers outside the sewers.

Eddie kicks a pebble into a storm drain and mutters, "Rich, I'm being followed," and hopes to god he didn't just accidentally doom a couple of people. Then he thinks, *it's Richie, he'd never.*

But then Richie would do a lot of things for the people he loves. Richie would swing a baseball bat at a clown's head for Bill, would put an axe through a crazed man's head for Mike, would *die* for Eddie and for the rest of them. For himself Richie might never. For them? Eddie has empirical evidence Richie would definitely murder a guy.

Shit.

Eddie turns a corner onto a less crowded street, hearing the sound of footsteps coming closer, and he hears Richie's voice from the shadows of an alleyway: "Eds? Get behind me."

"You gonna fight them with your fucking jokes?" Eddie mutters, but

he ducks into the alleyway anyway despite his instincts screaming at him not to do something so horror-movie *stupid*. “Gonna tell them you fucked their moms?”

Richie absently hums. In the dim light, it’s hard to see him, but Eddie steps behind him and sees white paint blooming on his neck. Shit.

The guys duck into the alleyway after Eddie, clearly intent on him, slipping brass knuckles out of their pockets. Eddie swallows, his hand slipping into his jacket pocket for the can of mace he carries around. He doesn’t like his odds against these guys, but if he’s faced down a killer clown he figures he can get away mostly unscathed from this if he times the spray right, gets one in the eyes.

Richie steps forward. Eddie catches sight of sharp teeth, blue eyes shifting to sinister, sickly yellow. “Afternoon, boys,” he says, his voice sounding out of place with his zombie-like appearance, with his mouth splitting into a horrible smile. “Why don’t you good folk of Derry **run along home now, hm? unless you’re out here cruising for a good time, same as me.**” A horrible, sick giggle issues from past his lips, and he says, sing-song, spitting blood at their feet and shambling closer, clothes turning ragged and dripping blood and river water, “**anything else you wanna take off for me tonight, ladies?**”

The two guys step back, both looking utterly horrified. “Oh, Jesus fucking Christ,” says the kid. “We gotta go, we gotta go, he’ll—”

“I’m not fucking *scared of you*,” the older guy snaps, but he looks absolutely terrified.

Eddie looks at Richie’s back, then at the two guys. Then he says, coldly furious, “Why don’t you two *dumb fucks* go back to the hellhole you crawled out of and leave me the fuck alone? Because I can guarantee you that if you step any closer, someone’s gonna get fucked up and *it sure as shit won’t be me.*”

The kid looks at Richie, and his eyes go horribly, terribly wide. “Fuck this shit,” he says, grabbing hold of his buddy’s arm, “we gotta—we gotta go, man, this isn’t worth it—”

Richie very nearly *pounces*, with only Eddie’s hand grabbing his

elbow keeping him back from—fuck, from jumping the older guy, who screams in horror and jumps back. “I said go,” Eddie snaps, his heart pounding in his chest like a drum. Oh god. “If I see you both again I’m fucking calling the cops!”

The guys skedaddle, and Richie—not Richie, not right now, *It* tries to go after them, roaring as it struggles against Eddie’s grip, losing the shape it had started to shift into: a beaten-up, waterlogged corpse. Eddie yanks it back into the alleyway, away from the two assholes running further away, and says, “Rich, Richie, *Richie*, hey, hey, *hey*, they’re gone, I’m okay.”

Golden eyes flicker back to blue, the corpse slowly shifting back, starting from where Eddie’s gripping his arm tight. “**what the fuck** did I do, Eds?” Richie asks, his voice losing the horrible, scraping quality more and more with every word, until he sounds like himself again. Until he looks like himself again, not halfway to a portrait hanging in the Falcon in memoriam. “Did I—”

“No, you just scared them off,” says Eddie, finally able to relax. God. Fuck. For a moment there he had honestly thought he would have to watch Richie actually kill and eat someone, and fuck, the guy might’ve been awful enough to at least warrant a good whack in the head, but cannibalism is not something Eddie needs on Richie’s conscience. Or on Eddie’s watch, either. “It’s fine, Richie, it’s okay. Hey, hey,” he says, “look at me.”

Blue eyes blink down at Eddie. It’s strange, but Richie looks—less pale, less like a corpse, when Eddie is holding him. More and more like himself, before he went into Neibolt for the last time. “Eddie,” says Richie, softly, and Eddie’s breath catches on a hook in his throat because, god, the last time he heard Richie say his name like that—

The last time he heard Richie say his name like that, Richie’d just been impaled. The last time he heard Richie say his name like that, Richie had told him he loved him. The last time, Richie had *died*, and it had taken Mike and Ben’s combined strengths to drag Eddie away from his body.

“I have to go,” says Richie, now, his voice cracking, gold flecks in his eyes.

“You don’t have to,” says Eddie.

“I do,” says Richie, then, “I’m *sorry*.” He pulls away, then, and from one step to the other, the color leaches back out of his skin. He turns to walk away, and Eddie tries to run forward, to sprint after him and catch him by his jacket, but Richie turns a corner and disappears.

“You *fucker*,” Eddie hisses at nothing in particular. “Stop fucking *leaving!* Goddammit, Richie, you asshole, you better be at the townhouse or I swear to god I will jump into the sewers to *haul your ass there*.”

There’s no response, not even It trying to taunt him.

God fucking *damn it*.

6. you feel like breathing

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from Rosi Golan's "Come Around".

content warnings: some abuse denial from Eddie about how bad he had it compared to Bev, and therefore some touching on child abuse. (the author maintains that both Eddie's mom and Bev's dad were Terrible Parents equally, just different flavors.) some spoilers for Duma Key.

Richie means to stay away from the townhouse, he really does. Whenever shit like that happens, whenever he almost lets It push him out of the driver's seat and shift him into a different form, it takes a whole lot of effort to run somewhere safe and let it run its course. He's still, nominally and usually, the one in charge of his body, and he usually can hide himself away from everyone else and push the shifting back, but—it's a lot of effort. It's exhausting. The last thing he needs to do after all that is go to Eddie, weak and tired and unstable.

But he hears the sound of music, drifting through the sewers like a siren's call. *I was beat incomplete, I've been had, I was sad and blue, but you made me feel, yeah you made me feel shiny and new—*

"Holy fuck, he kept it," Richie says out loud, because he knows the lyrics to "Like A Virgin" even now, twenty-seven years later, and he remembers the mixtape. He remembers the days he spent agonizing over which songs he could play off as a joke, over which songs would be perfect for Eddie, over which songs he could use to confess to if he ever wanted to, if he ever had enough courage to try. For the longest time after Derry he'd felt all hollowed out when Madonna came on, and he'd never known why until he came back here and saw Eddie again, beautiful as always.

And now Eddie's playing the mixtape.

Richie gets to the townhouse in almost no time at all, emerging from

the sewers into the basement to find Eddie setting up a lamp and some books. A boombox sits off to the side, loudly blaring Madonna singing, *Like a virgin, when your heart beats next to mine!*

“Took you long enough to get here,” says Eddie with a huff, crossing his arms.

“You kept it,” Richie blurts.

“Oh,” says Eddie. “Yeah.” He looks down, toe scuffing the basement floor, and Richie’s dead heart aches with just how much he loves this man. “I used to listen to your mixtape a lot, you know? I always felt a little happier, whenever I did, even when I didn’t remember.” He huffs out a breath, says, “And Myra wanted to keep it, Jesus.”

“Fuck her,” says Richie, and the vehemence in his voice surprises even him. He says, softer, “It’s your shit, dude. I gave it to you, not her, not anyone else.”

“Yeah, I know,” says Eddie. “I think—she didn’t even want it? But she’s angry and she wants to keep everything she can.” He lets out a breath, and sits down now beside a small stack of books, pulling a binder on top of the stack off. “She’s already got New York, though,” he murmurs to himself.

Richie should leave. Should go. It isn’t safe for him to be around Eddie like this, not with It lurking in his head, hungry for the taste of flesh, seasoned by fear.

He sits next to him, instead. “You loved that city,” he says.

“It’s New York, you never really stop,” says Eddie. “Yeah, it’s overrated and the traffic is horrible, but—I loved it anyway. And then. Well.” He shrugs. “She can have New York,” he says. “The brownstone we lived in, the skyline, the traffic, the little café I used to visit all the time with their gluten-free menu options, she can have all that now. I don’t know if I can be there without suffocating anymore.”

“Doesn’t that leave you with Derry?” Richie asks.

“It leaves me with literally everywhere else in America, dumbass,”

says Eddie, swatting his shoulder and opening the binder. “Anyway, I need you to see the number of missing people, lately.”

Dread, heavy and cold, drops into Richie’s stomach. “Did I—”

“You didn’t, Rich,” says Eddie, flipping to a page that reads *Missing Persons*. There are two names on it, connected by a bracket that leads to the words *eloped to Vegas*. “The only missing persons reports that were filed after Its death were for a couple who later sent a postcard from Vegas. You haven’t done anything. You certainly didn’t kill a kid who stumbled on you in the woods.”

Richie sucks in a breath. “How’d you know about the kid?” he asks. He remembers—*hunting* someone through the woods, remembers the hot spray of blood on his skin, blood staining some poor kid’s jacket a horrible red. He hadn’t been sure if it was real or not, had—had *hoped* it wasn’t, but hadn’t been sure. With It in his head, he’s never completely sure anymore.

“Because I ran into him today while at the Falcon,” says Eddie.

“You,” says Richie, slowly, “went to the *Falcon*?”

“Shut up, it was pissing down rain, the Falcon was the nearest place with a roof, and I only exchanged numbers with the kid for follow-up questions,” says Eddie. “I didn’t even get drunk, I just had a lemonade.”

“No, no, that’s not what I’m surprised about,” says Richie, leaning back onto his palms. “I just—you went into the Falcon and you didn’t walk out immediately. I thought...” He trails off, running his teeth over his lower lip and looking down at his kneecaps. “The place is a dive bar, you didn’t scrub your hands raw after you touched the counter?”

“I washed my hands when I got back here,” says Eddie, and there he is. “And—well. After.” He fiddles with the strap of his watch, fingers rubbing over the edges of it. “Thanks,” he says, after a moment. “For coming when I called you. Then and right now. And I’m—sorry.”

Richie shakes his head. “What, for calling on my help ‘cause some

shitheads were following you?” he asks. “That’s not something to be sorry about.”

“No, I just—” Eddie starts, then he pauses. “It pushed you pretty far,” he says. “And I’m the one who gave it the chance.”

A chill runs down Richie’s spine at the memory. He had been *furious*, coldly so, the same kind of fury that had propelled him to grab a tomahawk and slam it into the back of Bowers’ head. When he’d managed to swim back up from under it, the sight of Bowers’ dead body had been less unsettling than the fact that it was *Richie* who killed him, than the fact that all he really felt was glad Mike was okay. He is well fucking aware that had Eddie not dragged him back, he’d have done the same to those two chucklefucks, if not worse.

Is there—Is this something *intrinsic*, in Richie? Had there always been the potential to be a monster, deep in him, and It’s only pushing it out more and more? Richie’s always known he’s the type to keep secrets. Is this one he managed to keep even from himself, this capacity for murder? And even if it’s for the people he loves, with It in the back of his head, how long does he have until that love goes sour, gets poisoned?

“You *didn’t*,” he says, wrenching his thoughts away from that train. “Shit, Eddie, it’s not a bad thing to ask for help when people are stalking you. If anything *I* let It push me, I was just so fucking furious.”

“Yeah, but I wasn’t *thinking*—”

Ben had been wary when Richie had talked to him and Eddie from the sewers. Had pointed out that if it was him and Bev in their positions, Ben in Richie’s and Bev in Eddie’s, he wouldn’t want Bev near. But Richie isn’t Ben, Richie doesn’t have Ben’s good heart and radiant kindness. Maybe that’s why It’s possessed him.

“Eds,” says Richie, scooting closer despite his instincts yelling at him to stay the fuck away from Eddie, “I would rather get pushed than see you die.” He pauses. “Fucked-up thing to say, I know,” he says, tiredly, “but—I mean, I died to keep you alive. It’d be a waste of effort if you went and died on me.”

“Be a waste of my effort,” Eddie says, “if you got pushed too far.” His hand reaches out and touches Richie’s, and Richie involuntarily sucks in a breath that he doesn’t really need. In the dark, it’s hard to tell how long it’s been since someone just—held his hand like this, beyond just a brief, fleeting touch. That’s all he usually allows himself, because god knows what It might do to someone who dared hold on to him, but Eddie’s hand on his could almost restart his heart singlehandedly.

or you could hurt him.

Richie pulls his hand away, after a moment. “Well, I don’t wanna waste either of our efforts,” he says, forcing his voice to remain casual.

“Yeah, that would fucking suck, wouldn’t it,” says Eddie. “Rich?”

“Mm?”

“You know I’d keep you from going that far, right?” Eddie asks. “I’d be a pretty shitty—*something* if I did.”

Something, he says, like they’ve moved away from friendship into something else entirely. And they have, is the thing, Richie confessed his love in his last breaths and Eddie moved all the way back to Derry to get him back, said the word *dates* without tripping over it while talking about their meetings. But they’re not quite lovers, not in the physical sense. They’re definitely not married. “Is the word you’re looking for *boyfriend*, or...” he starts, unsure.

Eddie stares at him, looking gobsmacked for a moment. “So help me Rich, if this is a joke—”

“It’s a serious question!” says Richie.

“Oh,” says Eddie. “Well. Yes, if that’s what you want to call it. If you’re okay with that.”

Jesus fucking Christ, he had to die before he got a boyfriend. “I’m okay with that,” Richie says, feeling something fluttering about in his stomach, trapped in his intestines. “Just—don’t die, yeah? That’d fuck me up like nothing else.” Sometimes he still dreams of the

Deadlights' first horrible vision, the claw jutting out of Eddie's chest, so he knows for a fact that if Eddie were to die, Richie would likely just lose it. Would let It take him over, sink under and die for good. "Please," he adds, softly.

"I'll do my best not to die," Eddie solemnly says.

"And I'll do my best not to start eating people," says Richie. He pauses, then huffs out a mirthless laugh that echoes oddly around the basement. "God, we have some real fucking low standards, don't we?"

"We live in Derry, the place finds ways to fall short of the lowest standards," Eddie points out, which, true. Still. Richie hopes to god he won't be one of them.

sure about that, richie? sure you can live up to this promise? you didn't want to live up to the first one you made, after all. (A replay: so let's un-make it, we don't owe this town shit!)

"I need to go," says Richie, standing up and dusting his jacket off as best as he can, stepping away before Eddie can reach for his hand again. Months of living in the sewers have permanently fucked this leather jacket up, turned it all discolored and worn and dirty. No amount of cleaning Richie can do is going to make it look anything like it had before he walked into the house on Neibolt Street. "But I'll—I'll see you soon, Eddie."

"Yeah?" Eddie asks.

Richie smiles, reassuring. "Promise," he says, and means it.

--

When Eddie's mother died, he had her cremated, her ashes interred in a mausoleum somewhere in New York City that was kept so clean it was nearly spotless. She had said something about wanting him to keep her on the fireplace mantle, but Eddie hadn't wanted her to be watching over him in death, so he'd gone against that final wish and given her a mausoleum, far out of his way, in a lovely cemetery that prided itself on its cleanliness and care. He hadn't visited her in quite

a while.

When Eddie's father died, Sonia Kaspbrak had had him buried in a lovely cemetery in Derry, and then proceeded to never visit it at all. So, hey, maybe the apple really doesn't fall far from the tree.

Still. Due diligence, and all that. When the man's death anniversary comes around, Eddie decides, fuck it, and drives down from the townhouse to Derry's cemetery. It takes him some time to find Frank Kaspbrak's gravestone, and he's a little dismayed to find that it's somewhat overgrown, dwarfed by the newer, grander gravestones around it. He doesn't remember much about his father, the man had died when he was young, but he remembers Frank had been kind, and caring. He gave warm hugs. He deserves a nicer grave than this, a better son than Eddie, better than what he got in the end.

Eddie cleans the gravestone up, as best as he can. He pulls the weeds and brushes the dirt off, because—well, someone has to, and it's not as if the groundskeeper is doing his job well enough. Then he sits on the ground and says, somewhat awkwardly, “Uh, hey, Dad. Sorry I only visited you just now. A lot's happened.”

No answer. Not every dead person in Derry, Eddie supposes, can answer him from the sewers when he asks them something.

He doesn't really bother to try and catch his father up on what's happened. There's too much to go over, for a start, and Eddie just—wants to do this for some peace of mind. Like if he finally visits his father, he'll make up for being kind of a shitty son to his mom, and a shitty husband to his wife. (He knows what the other Losers might say to that, knows what *Richie* would say, but fuck, it was never as bad as Bev. It was bad, he can acknowledge that much now, but never that bad.)

Nothing happens. No big shift in Eddie's soul, no sudden clarity in his mind, nothing.

But at least his father's grave looks cleaner, and sometimes something small is really all he can do, he supposes. He pats the cold stone, like his father will somehow feel something, dead in the ground though he is, and then stands and walks away. He feels...lighter, weirdly. Not

like how a good son should feel, he's probably too late for that, but just—a little bit better for the visit.

Then he walks by the Toziers' graves, and his heart cracks a little.

There's no one there, either. And there are really only two graves: Maggie's and Wentworth's, because they'd wanted to be buried together, Eddie remembers Richie telling him about that, when they were sixteen and Wentworth had gotten a diagnosis, they had to move out from Derry to somewhere better, somewhere he could get treatment. He doesn't know what happened after they moved away, if Maggie lasted any longer than her husband or if she followed him soon after into the grave.

Richie doesn't have a grave. Richie's still legally missing. Richie's body had been buried underneath Neibolt when it collapsed, and it strikes Eddie as profoundly unfair, even without the possession being taken into account. Richie's never struck him as someone who would've liked being buried in the dark, has always been bright and loud and reckless in his memory.

(we can't leave him down here without his glasses richie RICHIE—)

They shouldn't have left him down there in the darkness.

Eddie stands at the two graves. "We'll get him back," he says, softly, before he turns away and walks back to his car.

He drives to the library, and goes to work. He hadn't been kidding when he told Richie they were managing on a budget that *barely* qualified as shoestring, but Cathy's proposal has gone through and they're due for some funds being diverted their way in the next few weeks, hopefully. In the meantime, one of the interns had the surprisingly bright idea of holding a fundraiser, in the form of a bake sale.

The great thing about being de facto head of Financial Services, Eddie's found, is that he can *delegate*. He can trust like, two other people below him not to fuck it up, so he entrusts them with planning the bake sale and how to market it and goes back to shouting down the phone at the repair company.

“—leave this shit half-assed!” he’s yelling down the phone as one of the interns walks over, the little teenaged girl who barely knows anything about Excel. “Yes, we *are* going to pay, there’s no question about that, but we are not going to pay you for the days you spent *not doing any repairs*—no! Absolutely not! We hired you to do repairs, we’ll pay you when the job is done! And the job isn’t *fucking done* if I still have to walk past fucking knife marks in the walls every day!” He blinks at her and says, “I’m gonna have to call you back with the breakdown, I’ve got shit to do.”

The intern very audibly gulps, clutching a file to her chest. “Hi,” she squeaks.

“What do you want,” says Eddie, flatly.

“J-Just—there’s, um, there’s a package for you?” the girl stammers. “F-From Atlanta. I think. It’s, uh, it’s some guy named Stanley Uris, I think. I, I was wondering if—”

“I know who Stan is,” says Eddie, putting the phone down. “Is there a note or something attached?”

“He just—um, he only wrote your name,” says the girl. “And a note that it’s only for you? I, um, I didn’t touch it! Nobody did, it was, um, super weird. Do you—Do you trust this Stanley guy, Mr. Kaspbrak? Because none of us’ve ever heard of him.”

“With my life,” Eddie says, and means it. Stan is one of his best friends, one of his *first* friends. “Besides, I’ve been waiting for this package.” He pats the girl on the shoulder, because—that’s something bosses do, right? He’s not really entirely sure, but his old boss used to do this sometimes.

The girl makes a noise like she’s just seen the clown pop out from nowhere, and runs out the door fast. Eddie turns around, scanning for Richie’s glasses, or some other trace of Richie that’d explain her just fleeing the scene immediately, but sees pretty much nothing.

Huh. Weird.

He heads over to the front desk. They have, technically, a mail room

in the library, but Bowers broke in there because—well, only It (and probably Richie) knows why Bowers did anything he did. The mail room's just fucked now, having been the victim of Bowers' petty rampage, so any packages meant for the library have just been piling up at the front desk till Cathy, or somebody from Archival, can take a look at them. Except this one.

It's an unassuming package wrapped in brown paper and twine. The most notable thing about it is that it's neat, the paper folded precisely over the contents to the point where Eddie fancies the could probably poke someone's eye out with a corner. The twine is very carefully tied, not too tightly but not too loosely, just *right*. Definitely Stan, then.

"You know this Stanley fella, then, Mr. Kaspbrak?" the guy at the front desk asks—Jeff, Eddie thinks his name is.

"He's one of my best friends," says Eddie. "I've been waiting on some news from him for a while now, I'm glad he's finally sent me something." He grabs the package, takes note: it's a rectangular shape, not very thick, so—maybe Stan did find some occult thing in Atlanta. How it can help here, Eddie's not sure, but they're in uncharted territory, he'll take all the help he can get.

Mike's old occult collection is in the basement, as Cathy said, although Eddie's been moving some of them out for home study. And because he's not such a huge fan of Derry basements, hasn't been for a while. Ben once mentioned It had scared him down here, invaded Ben's safe space with a headless boy and tried to kill him there, and as Eddie steps through the doorway into a realm of barely-organized shelves under dim light, he half-expects to see the shattered shell of a smoking egg under his heel. When he turns, he wonders if he'll see a headless boy, too, or the leper, or his mother. Or Richie, changed, face covered in white.

He doesn't see anything.

The strange thing is that he doesn't feel as relieved about that as he should be. After all, if Richie's not trying to scare the shit out of him, that means he's still *Richie*.

“Christ, Eds,” he mutters to himself. “Stop it, you’re forty, you can handle not talking to—to Richie like an adult. Besides, he’s fine, he’s probably—trying to contact Bill, or something.” Although Bill being in England probably complicates that. “Maybe Bev,” he continues.

Recently, Mike had set up a table and some audiovisual equipment down here, for researchers to use as they saw fit, with a table-lamp so they’d be able to read even in the basement’s chronically dim light. Eddie takes a few steps in the table’s direction when he hears—something. An indistinct whisper, a rustle of fabric, a footstep.

Eddie turns, and sees a leather jacket disappearing around the corner. “Rich?” he calls, softly, turning to follow Richie. “Hey, Rich?”

Richie doesn’t answer, not even when Eddie reaches another turn. There’s no flutter of a leather jacket, no footsteps, no smoking egg—

—but there is a red rose on the table, when Eddie finally makes it back. Beautiful and red, freshly-picked and clean of thorns.

“Did you distract me to surprise me with a fucking rose?” Eddie asks. “That’s—honestly sweet of you, Rich.” He used to try and surprise Myra, with roses and flowers and cruises, but they were always to placate her when she was upset, always to try and restore some sort of equilibrium in the status quo when one of them had upset it. She’d never really done the same for him, either. Maybe the closest she got was buying two tickets to plays she wanted to see and he was curious about, but he never got roses from her.

Weird fucking thing to be upset over, true. But there was a lot either of them didn’t get from each other.

“Thanks,” Eddie says now, fingers tracing delicately over the petals, marveling over their deep red color. “I’m putting this in a vase at the townhouse.”

A soft chuckle on the wind reaches Eddie’s ears, and he smiles softly down at the rose before he tucks it away.

--

The book Stan sends him is one about ghosts, and how to drive them

out. It's—not the most helpful book there is, because Eddie doesn't have the requirements for any of the major religious rituals listed, and the ingredients for many of the less religious and more witchy one's are a little too exotic for Eddie to get. At least one of them is an illegal drug, he's pretty sure.

(He does try one, but:

“Well,” says Richie in the salt circle, as Eddie grumbles thunderously and grabs a broom to sweep up the dismal failure of the ritual, “I mean, you tried. I appreciate the effort.”

“It wasn't enough!”

“Eds, my man,” says Richie, leaning on his palms, looking a little more human today, “it's helping. Okay? You're helping. That's enough for me.”)

“Can Catholic priests exercise demonic alien clown ghosts?” Eddie asks Mike over the phone, when Mike calls in to check on him. “Just, hypothetical question here.”

“Yeah, hi, Eddie,” says Mike, “no, I'm pretty sure Pennywise falls out of Catholic jurisdiction. Or—any religion's jurisdiction for that matter.” Or any tribe's. “How're you and Richie?”

“Some days are better than others,” Eddie admits. Today is not one of them, It had pushed into a conversation they were having in the bathroom, breaking the Harrison Ford Voice Richie was doing to make Eddie laugh. “He's not really talking to me right now.” It's something Richie does—isolate himself the second It manages to slip past his guard, no matter how much Eddie tries to get him to come back. He does come back, sometimes, but it takes hours, even days, and every time he does there's always something *off* at first. Like he's trying desperately to remember what it's like to be Richie Tozier, plain and simple, and not Richie-possessed-by-Pennywise.

What is It doing to you, Richie? Let me help. Maybe I'm useless when it comes to exorcism but I can hold you, and maybe that's enough.

Or maybe not.

“Will he come if you call him?” Mike asks.

“Usually he does,” says Eddie, looking down at the sinkhole where the house on Neibolt Street used to be. Ben’s not wrong. Eddie might be safety-conscious, might be a risk analyst, might still be wrestling with the bone-deep terror of being alive by himself for the very first time in his life since he was thirteen, but sometimes he very strongly considers doing something deeply ill-advised. Like cutting through the safety fence and climbing down into the sinkhole. “Sometimes it’s a crapshoot, though. Hey, quick hypothetical, do you think Richie’s still in the cistern under Neibolt Street or what?”

“...are you on Neibolt Street right now.”

“Maybe?” Eddie says.

Mike disconnects. A couple of minutes later, Eddie’s suddenly invited to a group phone call, and he squints at it for a long moment before swiping to accept.

“*Are you fucking kidding me,*” Stan shouts over the phone.

“We have really,” says Ben, “got to stop walking into the house that traumatized us all as children. Especially since it doesn’t even *exist* anymore.”

“I don’t know if this is the most romantic thing I’ve ever heard or the dumbest,” says Bev. “But don’t—don’t go into the *sinkhole*, Eddie.”

“I’m not going into the sinkhole right *now*,” Eddie argues, even though he’s up near the fence. “I’d need safety equipment and shit and someone on the outside first, I’m not a complete dumbass.”

“*Why* were you planning to go into the s-s-s-sinkhole?” Bill asks.

“Its lair is probably still down there,” Eddie points out.

“Its lair is fucked to hell and back,” says Mike, “so I don’t think Richie’s staying there anymore.” Which, well, fuck, he’s right about that. Richie would likely avoid the holy hell out of the well house, after all he’s been through under it.

"But he isn't just traveling through the sewers all day," Eddie reasons. "There's gotta be a place he uses as a base."

"Somewhere he thinks is safe," Mike says. "It went somewhere it knew no one would come. Maybe Richie's working on similar logic—he goes somewhere that's safe to him."

Somewhere that's safe. Not the Toziers' house, Richie's parents weren't always there, were always too busy as Richie grew up. Certainly not the high school, or their old haunt at the ice cream parlor. Not Richie's mother's old shop, where they used to play when they were just five or six years old, when they were kids who thought their parents would love them right and the future was a bright, sprawling thing in front of them, waiting for their footprints. Not the Capitol, Bowers had chased Richie out of there once.

And then it clicks.

"The clubhouse," Eddie says, around the same time as Bev says, "He'd be at the *clubhouse*."

"Really?" Ben asks, surprised.

"It was still standing when we went there," Eddie points out, "and props to you at thirteen for somehow building an underground clubhouse that's lasted twenty-seven years without collapsing in on itself, but—we always felt safe there." Because Ben had built it with love and care, had built it knowing in his heart that it would be a shelter for the Losers. Of course Richie would go there. Of course Richie would make it his home base. *Home is where you go when you have nowhere left to run*, Eddie thinks, *where you go when all other doors are closed to you, where you go and the memories chain you down. Or set you free.*

"Why d'you need to find him, anyway?" Ben asks.

"I have his lunch," Eddie explains.

"What," says Stan.

"Oh, you're gonna hate this, Stan," says Ben, before launching into an explanation.

“Yeah, I hate this,” says Stan, “but also I actually get it. Did the book I sent you work?”

“Nope,” says Eddie, thinking, *they didn’t have that magic, I didn’t believe in them*. Lapsed Catholicism can really fuck with someone’s belief in witchy rituals, he supposes. “But Richie said he appreciated it anyway.” Which is true, Richie had laid down on a sandy beach in their weird dreamscape that night and said, *Tell Stanley thanks for trying anyway. Even if it didn’t work. It’s the thought that counts and all*. Then he’d leaned over and brushed Eddie’s hair out of his face and smiled, that impish little smirk that said he knew something Eddie didn’t, and they’d wrestled in the sand a while like the kids they used to be, thirteen and rolling on the carpet.

Eddie’s face is warm, at the memory. *Boyfriends*, he thinks. No, that’s wrong, that doesn’t quite fit them. *Lovers*, that’s a better word, a letter away from *Losers*, a V in red sharpie scrawled over an S in black.

If only he could say it back.

“Oh, if he appreciates it,” says Stan.

“Tell him we’re lll-luh-looking,” says Bill, the last tendrils of sleep bringing out the stutter. “Just hang in th-there, we’ve found some leads.”

“I found some news articles about something in Florida that could be related,” says Mike. “Bill’s coming over, we’re going to check out Duma Key.”

Eddie goes up on his tiptoes, the better to see the sinkhole, the downward slope of it. Duma Key—home of some one-armed artist who does surrealist sunsets, he thinks. Myra used to go wild for them, and had tried to pester Eddie into picking up a painting or two. For his part, Eddie never liked those sunsets. Something about them put him on edge, something about them sent a shiver down his spine, but he could never quite explain to Myra why he let Jacob Farman from HR gobble them up instead. She’d probably have clucked her tongue and recommended he go talk to someone over that, *paintings are supposed to evoke feelings, but if you feel so upset over them...*

Well, here's the proof, he thinks, beyond Jacob Farman suddenly losing it after buying the damn things and being arrested for murdering his ex-wife's boyfriend. Mike and Bill wouldn't be heading to Duma Key if there's truly nothing there. "Be careful," he says. "That's pretty uninhabited, right?"

"Not really, but close to it," says Mike. "And there's rumors flying around."

"In the meantime," Bev says, "be *careful*. You especially, Eddie. Mike, Bill, do you need anything? Ben and I can take the yacht to Florida, take you guys where you need to go."

"I've been to Duma Key before," Ben adds. "Good view, a little too overgrown and too tied up in lawsuits over much of the ownership. But I know the place well enough."

Eddie figures he might know the place, too, if he ever set foot on it. Maybe he's never been, but all his life he's been good at finding his way around places. But—he has to stay here, in Derry, because someone has to. Someone needs to. Richie is here, tethering him to Derry, Richie needs someone to stay *here*, because if not then they'll lose him. Eddie knows this in his bones, the way he knows the sky is blue and the grass is green and Derry is a special little slice of hell transplanted into Maine.

He wonders if this is what Mike felt—this helplessness, waiting for something to happen, waiting for news, *waiting*. But it isn't quite the same, is it? Because there's someone Eddie is here for.

"Be careful," he says, before the call disconnects.

"You too," says Mike.

"Don't fall through the trap door," says Ben.

--

Eddie goes to the Barrens.

Eddie does not fall through the trap door. Instead, he prods at the ground with a broomstick until it hits something wooden and hollow,

then crouches down to knock. “Hey, Richie, I know you’re in here,” he says. “Let me in.”

“What in the *fuck*,” says Richie from underneath, sounding alarmed. That’s—strange. He sounds like he’s pretty far down, only the clubhouse was never that big. It had barely been big enough for the seven of them at full adult height, and Richie, the tallest of all of them and the one with the freakishly huge forehead, had nearly knocked his head on a beam. “Eddie, what are you *doing* here?!”

“You forgot your lunch while you were giving me the cold shoulder, genius,” Eddie tells him. “Let me in or I’ll break my diet and risk a heart attack.”

“I’ve seen you eat burgers, you’re fine,” Richie says.

“At thirteen!” says Eddie, shaking the paper bag at the trap door. “I’m forty now, I’m more at risk of cholesterol build-up and a fucking heart attack! Let me the fuck in!”

“I’m not fucking letting you in,” says Richie, “just wait up there, I’m coming up. Jesus, Eds.”

Eddie sits down, then, planting his ass on the dirt beside the trap door and trying very very hard not to think about what else might be in that dirt. After a moment, the trap door opens, and Richie pokes his head up, squinting at Eddie and the sunlight.

“Fuck,” says Eddie, softly, seeing the white paint streaked across Richie’s cheek, spreading slowly outward. “Rich?”

“Yeah,” says Richie, rubbing at the white makeup with a tired sigh. Eddie notes, uneasily, the frills on his sleeves. Those hadn’t been there before. “It’s a bad day, Eds. Why’d you come out here? You know it’s dangerous with me like this, right?”

That—had been a thought, screaming in the back of Eddie’s mind, but it’s Richie. He’d do some wild shit for the guy. Has done, in fact. “I wanted to talk to you again after that mess in the bathroom,” he says, with a shrug. “You weren’t talking back.”

“You could’ve just fallen asleep or something,” Richie points out. “I

coulda talked to you then, and you wouldn't have to..." He stops, then looks away, scratching at the white make-up. Bits of it flake off, but so does some of Richie's skin, his nails leaving blood welling in its wake. *You wouldn't have to see me like this*, hangs in the air between them.

"Just isn't the same," says Eddie, deciding not to point out how disturbing that is. "Are you going to take the damn burger now? I waded through the goddamn *Kenduskeag* to get here, god knows how much shit's in there. I'm probably gonna get athlete's foot if not some kind of nasty-ass infection from the water—"

"Okay, okay," says Richie, climbing out of the clubhouse properly and snatching the burger from his grasp. "Don't have to be so fucking dramatic about it, Jesus. Athlete's foot is normal, man, everybody gets it."

"Not everyone, are you *okay*," says Eddie. "It only happens when your foot's been wet a while and you've been keeping it in your shoes and—" His eyes, quite unwillingly, are pulled to the gaping hole in Richie's chest, and the memory flickers in the forefront of his mind: Richie, with a claw through his chest, blinking down at Eddie in shock. *Eds?* he'd said, his voice cracking the way it used to, when they were young, so small and scared.

Eddie hadn't screamed. He heard Bill screaming, heard Stan, but Eddie had only whispered Richie's name.

Richie now folds down into a sitting position in front of him, and says, snapping his fingers in front of Eddie's face, "Hey, hey. Ground Control to Edward Kaspbrak." He doesn't do a Voice. Come to think of it, has he done a Voice in a while, besides that Harrison Ford impression Pennywise broke through? Eddie kind of misses them, wonders what happened to them, to Richie pulling them out at the drop of a hat. "Come in, Kaspbrak, come in. Getcha spaghetti-head in the game."

"Stop mixing metaphors," Eddie complains, catching Richie's wrist and pushing his hand away from his face. He doesn't let go, though, even through the instinctive flash of revulsion at touching something that's still wet from the sewers. "I was just—thinking, that's all."

Trying to figure out where I fucked up in trying to exorcise It from you with Stan's book."

"You didn't fuck up," says Richie. He doesn't pull away from Eddie, and the color starts to seep back into his skin. Huh. That's something. Eddie files away that thought for later.

"Let me own my mistakes, Rich," he says, stroking his thumb over Richie's wrist. Is it just him, or is there something beating, faintly, under Richie's skin? Certainly it could just be the clown, but then if it were then Eddie doubts it'd be trying to give him *hope*. "I did fuck up somewhere. I didn't believe in them enough—I can believe plenty of shit," his mother can attest to that, "but I don't have the strength of belief of seven people. Nobody does."

Richie goes quiet, looking down at their hands, at Eddie holding his wrist. He breathes out slow, then gently pulls his hand away. "You're thinking about calling them back now?" he asks, and Eddie doesn't miss the thread of anxiety under his voice. "Because—I don't know, Eds, there's a lot I can't guarantee if every Loser's here."

"Not right now," says Eddie, "they're going to check out a lead on saving you." All the way out in Florida, for some reason. Well, at least Mike's gonna fulfill a lifelong dream. He adds, "Whaddaya mean?"

"It's holding a grudge," says Richie. "If all seven of us are here—" He stops, cocks his head to the side, and shivers as if something's whispering in his ear. "It says it missed you all," he says, his eyes going briefly unfocused, the white paint spreading across one side of his face like a rash. Eddie catches a hint of sharp teeth on one side of Richie's mouth. "It says it *craved* you all, and I'm an—wow, I'm an appetizer, huh? I'm the only goddamn meal you're getting, shitweed."

"Rich," says Eddie, "I'm right here, are you talking to the *clown*," and Richie shakes his head. The teeth flash once more, before Richie scrubs his hand over his mouth and they disappear, like they never were.

"Sorry," says Richie. "I'm—it's—usually I'm *alone* out here, Eddie,

nobody comes out here anymore because I keep chasing them off.”

And doesn't that break Eddie's heart like nothing else. Richie withers in isolation, starves in the darkness, he's known that about his best friend since forever. “You suck at being alone, you used to hate detention because you were always *alone*, unless I got in trouble with you,” Eddie says now. “Also, who gave you the right to chase people out of the Barrens, asshole? The place doesn't belong to you.”

“Oh, no, I pissed all over the trees here, it's definitely my territory now,” says Richie, with a little smile.

“Oh my god, you're not a fucking animal,” says Eddie, reaching over to smack his shoulder. “*Still* doesn't belong to you, at least not you alone. That's *our* place you're squatting in.”

Ours, as in the Losers, not Derry's. Even now, after uprooting his whole life in New York and moving out here, Eddie can't completely think of himself as Derry's, anymore. There's always a split between him and the rest of Derry, in his head, a line delineating the Losers from the rest, and it's been there since they were kids, since the seven of them all came together. *There's us and there's them, and fuck them.*

“We did kinda collapse the last lair It had,” Richie says, “and—the clubhouse is a good place to stay. No one else knows it's there.” *No one gets hurt out here but me*, he doesn't say, but Eddie hears it anyway, and it's a knife in the stomach, the tip wriggling and tearing through soft fleshy insides. “You shouldn't be here, Eds,” says Richie, quietly.

“You're not the boss of me, Rich,” says Eddie, softly. “And you definitely don't own the Barrens either. I'll come and go whenever I want.”

“Not even if I tell you it's a bad idea?” Richie asks. “And you know it's fucking *terrible* if I'm the one saying it. Like ditching New York for Derry.”

Eddie knows that, already. He's known since he got into his car and drove all the way to Derry, his belongings packed up in the trunk. He's known since he first dreamed of Richie, screaming for help. He's

known for—a while that this, all of this, is probably not the safest thing he could ever have done. He's a risk analyst. He's run the numbers. He ran them on the way to Derry and he ran them on the way to the Barrens, and came up with some terrible, terrible odds.

The thing is that he doesn't care. Or, okay, that's wrong. He *does* care, but—

"It's worth the risk," he says out loud. "You're worth the risk." He reaches over, pats Richie on the shoulder and says, "Losers stick together."

Richie's eyes flicker that terrifying gold for a moment, before Eddie takes his hand once more. Then they flicker back to blue, and Richie says, "That's what I'm scared of."

"Oh, come on, what, you scared of us now or something?" Eddie asks, scoffing. "I promise I'll make sure we don't bully you to fucking *death*."

"Oh, no, that's not what I'm scared of, that's what I'm counting on you to do to It," says Richie. "I don't want you assholes to get fucking killed together. I'm—That would just fucking break me." *And It knows that*, he doesn't say, but it's the logical conclusion to that thought process.

"We're gonna be fine," says Eddie, squeezing Richie's hand tightly. "We killed this fucking clown before. Like, *twice*. We can do it again."

"We're the worst clown-killers," says Richie, "if we gotta do it three times to get it right."

"In our defense," says Eddie, "it's an alien demon clown that feeds on kids, conventional means weren't going to work from the get-go." But three—third time's the charm, Eddie thinks, and if seven's a magic number then surely, so's three. The third time, he knows, they'll kill It for good and all.

They just have to save Richie first.

7. and we love like fools

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from Lauren Aquilina's "Fools".

content warnings: spoilers for Duma Key. mentions of drug use.

Bev's sitting on a dune-coated beach when Richie sees her, clear and strong. She's set up two lawn chairs and a striped umbrella, and sips a glass of pink lemonade as he walks up, feeling weirdly overdressed for the dream. When he looks around, he sees a house in the distance, painted pink, part of it jutting out over the sea. Seashells dot the sand around them, and Richie swears he sees—tennis balls, apparently, floating off the shore. Floating amongst the tennis balls is a single paper boat, and Richie wonders, suddenly, if that's the boat that started this whole mess.

A turtle is making its slow way back to the sea. For a moment, Richie swears it swivels its head to look at him, but—that would be ridiculous.

"This isn't California," he says. That much is obvious to him already, years of living in LA have acquainted him with a lot of the nearby beaches.

"No, it's Florida," says Bev. She grins at him and nods to the empty lawn chair. "Hi, Richie."

"Has Mike scored with a grandma yet?" Richie asks, sitting as she's bid him to do.

"No," says Bev, unable to repress a little smile. "Not a lot of grandmas around here, really. This is Duma Key, it's practically uninhabited. Especially around this time of year." She nods to the ocean in front of them, stretching out for what looks and feels like an infinity. "Nice place, right?"

"Fuck yeah," says Richie. "Almost makes me want to live in Florida,

get busy with all the grandmas. They don't all have dried-up cooches, do they?"

"Beep beep, Richie," says Bev, smiling fondly. The smile disappears when she adds, "I don't think it's going to last much longer."

Richie cuts a surprised glance over to her. She's leaning forward, looking off at—something in the horizon, something building, a storm about to blow in. "How d'you know?" he asks. "Is it the Deadlights?"

Bev chews on her lower lip, then lets out a breath and says, "Sort of. But also, there's this artist named Freemantle."

"One-armed artist from Florida, yeah, I know," says Richie. "That's the one whose paintings are cursed, right?"

"Not just cursed," she says, "they're—they were *possessed*. They served as channels of possession, anyway, for a thing that talked through the seashells, through those paintings. Through the pipes."

A cold stone drops right into Richie's stomach. "But It's in *Derry*," he manages, "fuck, Bev, *I'm* It."

"It's not here," Bev says. "Whatever this thing was, it's—close to Pennywise, but it's not. It wasn't." She shakes her head. "Pennywise covered a small town and didn't go further. This thing Freemantle dealt with, it wasn't the same. It got to people via his paintings." She takes a sip of her lemonade, and says, "He can paint things, too. I mean *visions*, like I used to have. He had a painting of us ready when we came here, you know?"

"What?"

"He called it *The Seekers*," says Bev. "Me, Mike, Bill and Ben. Watching the sunset. He knew we were coming—not our names, not exactly why, just that we were coming to ask for help." She drums her fingers on her arm rest, takes a long sip of her lemonade. Richie wonders, suddenly, where her cigarettes are, if she's trying to quit, if even in dreams she's trying not to reach for a pack of cigarettes. "We didn't get much," she says, sounding almost apologetic. "His

recommendation was to seal It away, push it into something inanimate and then dump it somewhere in the middle of the ocean, but when we asked what to do about you he wasn't helpful."

"Let me guess, I die in this plan," says Richie.

"Yeah," says Bev, and there's fire in her eyes, makes him think of Ben's little poem, *your hair is winter fire*. Her eyes are fire too, but they're a wildfire, stubborn in not going out no matter what. Dangerous, too. "Not acceptable." She sips at her lemonade again as the tide comes in, leaving a tennis ball on the shore. The little paper boat floats on the water, still, riding each wave no matter how tall, no matter if it should overwhelm the flimsy little thing. "Just sealing It away isn't acceptable either. We have to *kill It*, properly. That's the only way to make sure It doesn't hurt anyone ever again."

"You know that's a tall order, right?" Richie asks. "You can kill It, or you can save me, I don't—I don't know if you can do both."

"I don't know either," says Bev, "but it's worth the trying."

Worth the trying. God. Richie can't remember the last time someone thought he was worth even that much. Or—he can, really, but it had been before he'd moved away from Derry. Just a little over twenty years, then.

He's missed Bev. He's missed Eddie. He's missed the Losers, has for a very long time. The absence of them had left a hole in his heart he hadn't known how to fix, and he'd been so lonely, and he'd thought that was *fine*. He'd thought it was *fair*. But now there are six people in this world who want to save him, six people who mourned his death, six people who leave an empty chair for him at their table, and Richie is—loved. Loved and missed.

"If it doesn't work?" he asks.

Bev looks away from him. "There was another painting," she says, softly. "Of you and Eddie."

"Oh," says Richie, feeling—exposed, somehow, his chest flayed open. Some rando one-armed artist in Florida *knows*? Fuck weird psychic

powers and fuck It and fuck this thing like It that's sleeping in the ocean somewhere, trapped in an inanimate object, starving slowly to death. Richie is sick to death of them yanking him around like this. God-fucking-dammit, he just wanted to get up on stage and make people *laugh*. Or just—make one person laugh, really. One person with brown eyes, one little spitfire hypochondriac, no matter how much it made his palms sweat.

“He was holding you,” Bev explains. “Like in Neibolt. He was holding on to your corpse, and that's what the guy painted. It *looked* like Neibolt, but it—wasn't the way I remembered it.” She sighs. “I don't know. Maybe Freemantle got some of the details wrong, he's never met any of us before today and he's certainly never met you or Eddie.”

Maybe. Or maybe it's the future. Maybe the light at the end of this hellish tunnel is the one everyone goes into after they die. Maybe they succeed in killing It, but they can't save Richie. Maybe Richie's doomed, either way, but at least he'll die as himself.

It's an odd feeling, knowing you'll likely die. Almost certainly die. Richie wonders if he should be more—in denial about it, the way everyone else seems to be, instead of resigned.

But he doesn't say that. Better not to deflate his friends' hopes and dreams, this time. Better to be selfish, because maybe then, even in this half-life parody he's trapped in, he can steal some time from It to spend with his friends, before he becomes truly dangerous.

“You got any more where that lemonade's from?” he asks, changing the subject away from psychic one-armed artists and Eddie holding his corpse, the future that he thinks is waiting for him.

To Bev's credit, she doesn't call him out on it.

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Richie's been missing for just under a month when his old agent calls Bill's phone. “Apparently,” Bill says, over Skype, looking pretty exhausted from having flown to London from Florida, “he thinks Richie's off doing d-d-drugs in a mountain cabin s-suh-somewhere.”

“You’re fucking with me,” says Eddie. He’s in the townhouse right now, enjoying a day off (really sorting through Mike’s bulging files on Derry in what used to be the townhouse lobby) and praying to whatever god is willing to hear him out that the repair company isn’t running rings around the people he’s delegated to, the sneaky fucks.

“Well, okay, the m-mmm-mountain cabin’s an embellishment,” says Bill, giving a ghost of an exhausted smile, his stutter coming through in his tired state, “but he thinks Rrr-Richie’s in r-r-rehab or something like that. A mental health retreat, he c-c-c-called it. I t-told him, we wouldn’t have f-f-filed a missing persons report if he was, if we knew where he was, and d-d-d-do you know what the guy sssss-suh-said?”

Eddie braces himself. “What?” he asks, warily.

“He said th-there wasn’t any n-n-need,” says Bill, the smile vanishing as he shakes his head, clearly *pissed*. “Th-That Richie’s just, just getting his k-k-kicks off and out of his system before he goes back to work, that he s-sometimes goes on hiatus that way, and w-we shouldn’t w-w-wuh-worry so much about him, he’s a big boy. And that of c-c-course we didn’t know where he went because we don’t kn-know Richie and we don’t know his f-fucking *habits*.” That’s when Bill gives a mirthless chuckle. “He said th-the agency was considering d-dropping Richie.”

“I hope you told him to fuck off,” says Eddie, feeling rage twisting his guts around in knots. “Scratch that, what’s his number, *I’ll* do it—”

“No, I did it already,” says Audra fucking Phillips herself, poking her head into frame and pecking Bill on the temple. Eddie briefly stares at the screen, mouth agape, before he shakes his head. It’s so *weird* seeing Audra, the actual Audra herself, like this—not in character, not in a public persona, not on the red carpet, just a woman who looks pretty fucking close to Bev. It’s even weirder seeing her and Bill just being married, because. Well. That’s *Bill*, that’s one of Eddie’s best friends, and usually your childhood friends don’t grow up to get married to A-list actresses. “You must be Eddie,” Audra’s saying.

“Hi,” Eddie manages, not quite sounding like himself. He coughs, then says, “Uh, yeah, I’m Eddie Kaspbrak. I’m—a friend of your husband’s, we grew up together.”

"I t-told her, Eddie, it's fine," says Bill.

"Marriage counseling works wonders," Audra adds. "Less so with the—clown. Thing. Which I'm still not sure I believe, Bill." But she loves him, Eddie realizes, so she's trying to. After all, the effects are right there, have been since they all got back from Derry to their real lives. To fix their real lives, in some cases.

"Yeah, honestly, for the b-b-best you didn't," Bill says, with a tired sigh. "It was t-traumatic."

Stan told Patty and Bill told Audra, and neither of them had Stan or Bill committed. Patty wholeheartedly believes them, and Audra might not think the same way, but she's at least willing to try. Eddie is glad for his friends, he really is, they've lucked out better than the rest of them in settling down, but—he tries to imagine telling Myra about all of it. Derry, the clown, Richie dying. *I loved you so much.*

She would absolutely have him committed.

For the best, really, that he didn't. He wonders if she's having a good time in New York, and hopes she is. Their marriage had never worked for either of them, as much as they'd tried to make it work. Or she'd tried, and Eddie had gone along with it, because what else could he do? Besides, she wanted to keep him safe.

But love doesn't just mean wanting to keep someone safe behind a wall, keeping the rest of the world away. Love is Bev handing him the fencepost because she believes he could kill It, love is Bill sitting next to him and apologizing for what he said and holding Eddie close while Eddie breaks down crying, love is the Losers surrounding him and holding him and grieving with him. Love is Richie, trying to make him laugh, putting himself between Eddie and the monster, telling him *you're braver than you think*, saving him simply because he wanted Eddie to make it out of the house alive.

Love, Eddie thinks, is when you trust your wife enough to tell her the truth: the whole, fantastic, unbelievable truth. Love is when she believes you anyway.

"So did his management drop him?" Eddie asks, now.

"It's looking like they might," says Audra, elbowing her husband. "Bill, sweetie, budge up, there's room on this couch for two."

Bill obliges, and Audra settles in beside him, leaning into his side. "W-We're working on finding a n-new agency if they do," says Bill. "Or. Well. Audra is."

"I know people," says Audra. "More people than Bill does, anyway. And I've been through this shit before, I want to make things easier on Tozier once he gets back. When you rescue him from—whatever you're going to rescue him from, you tell him to call me, all right? I'll give him a list of names to hit up."

"Yeah, will do," says Eddie, scribbling out a note on a pad of Post-Its: *call Audra*. He wonders if Richie's listening in on them right now, and knocks out some taps in Morse code in case he can. *R-I-C-H-I-E*.

Nothing.

"M-Mike came with me to London," Bill's saying, "we're gonna check around the mmm-more occult b-buh-buh-bookstores here, see if there's s-sss-something worth trying in them."

Eddie drums his fingers against his leg and says, "The Sìth."

"What?"

"Uh, fairies from Scotland," says Eddie, getting a raised eyebrow from Audra. "It's—okay, it sounds weird, but I ran into this kid who'd met Richie in the woods, and he said something about these Sìth that made me *wonder*, y'know? Like, the stories are probably very exaggerated by now, but what if there's something in there we can use? If we go back far enough?"

"Fairies," Audra repeats, frowning. "That's. Uh."

"That could work," says Bill, leaning in close. His gaze flicks towards Audra, and he leans into her side to whisper something in her ear. She sighs.

"If you're sure, Bill," she says, kissing him lightly on the cheek before she leaves.

“Would it?” Eddie asks.

“Th-There’s one way to find out,” says Bill. “Mike and I’ll t-t-take a trip tomorrow. I have a couple of fff-fuh-friends from college here and in Scuh-Scotland, I can ask them for help. And if they n-need to know anything, why,” and a corner of his mouth lifts upward, in a knowing, conspiratorial smile, “I’m j-just doing some research for a b-book.”

They talk for a little while more after that, mostly just Bill catching Eddie up on developments on both *Attic Room* and *Homecoming Queen* (they’ve reached a deal and now casting’s in process) and some writer named Paul Sheldon coming out with a new book, *Misery’s Return*.

“I think I remember him,” says Eddie, the memory swimming back up, of a scrappy teen of fifteen scowling at little Eddie Kaspbrak as Eddie biked past his house. “The Sheldons lived right across the street from us, he was ol’ Paulie who smoked like a chimney when his mom wasn’t home—hey, think he remembers Derry?”

“P-P-P-Paulie Sheldon, *fuck*, I completely forgot we knew him,” says Bill. “Maybe not. Maybe it’s for the best he d-doesn’t. He’s b-been through some shit lately.”

Eddie can hardly blame Bill for thinking that way. Hell, he’d gladly forget It again if he could, but he doesn’t want to forget his friends again. He doesn’t want to let the bravery slip through his fingers again. If it’s a choice between forgetting his friends and It or remembering It and his friends, Eddie would choose to keep the memory, every time, carve it into his heart with a kitchen knife.

The conversation winds down, after that. Eventually, Bill calls off, wanting to grab some time to write before he falls into the waiting arms of sleep. Eddie wishes him a good night, then turns the laptop off and walks up to his bedroom, intending to get his running clothes and go for a jog.

“Oh, you motherfucker,” he sighs when he opens the door, because Richie’s written on the wall, in tomato sauce Eddie just *knows* he got from the kitchen, *HOW DID BILL LAND THAT?* “I have to clean this!”

There's a laugh from the pipes, bright and sweet. A knock echoes from the walls, *S-O-R-R-Y*.

"Yeah, you're real fucking sorry," Eddie mutters. "Are you going to clean this up if I leave this? Knock once for yes and—actually, just knock once." He waves a hand at the message, now dripping down the walls in thick, tomato-y strands. Eugh. "I'm going for a run. This better be cleaned up by the time I get back, Richie."

There's a knock on the wall before it falls silent.

After that, and after pulling on his shorts and plugging in his earbuds, Eddie walks out the door, out of the townhouse, and starts jogging.

He'd gotten into the habit in New York, while in college—his roommate Veronica Sawyer liked to clear her head after a night of nightmares via a morning jog, and Eddie had joined up with her on account of *why the fuck not*. He'd come to like it: his feet slapping against the ground, his body pushing against its limits just a little bit further. After marrying Myra, he went from weekly runs to almost *daily* runs, one of the few escapes he had. And they had been escapes, during their marriage: a place she didn't know, a thing all his own, because she couldn't ever fathom running in *New York City* but figured that if he was healthy and avoided the Bad Neighborhoods, clearly, it wasn't too bad.

Derry's different from New York. Smaller, for one thing. And New York might be a cesspool of crime and filth, but sure as shit it'll never hold a candle to Derry. New York has human criminals, and even the worst ones, the ones in the newspapers with big headlines about their crimes, are simply—human, just really fucked up in their souls. Derry has, *had* an evil child-eating demonic murder clown alien living in its sewers, and it's still shaking off the hangover from Pennywise's rotten whiskey. Derry has known *evil* in its (Its) purest form, the way New York and Los Angeles and all those other cities never will. Compared to the fucking clown, what's a mugger with a knife? At least the mugger won't show him his worst fears and then eat his corpse.

Start slow. Put the speed on slow—a bit at a time, until you're running faster than the beat of the drums pounding in your ears, until Madonna's "Like A Virgin" fades to something else, *wouldn't it be nice*

if we were older, then we wouldn't have to wait so long...

Wouldn't it be nice, indeed. God, Richie had practically been screaming his love through that mixtape, hadn't he? Madonna, Beach Boys, The Cure, The Smiths, Cyndi fucking Lauper crooning *if you're lost you can look and you will find me, time after time*, they'd all been Richie trying to say *I love you* somehow without giving it away. Of course Eddie had felt better listening to this mixtape. Not safer, but more—supported, somehow, like even if he fell someone would catch him, not hold him back so he wouldn't fall in the first place.

I loved you so much. So much that Richie could've said, instead of that. Could've made a joke, could've said something about fucking Eddie's mom just to cheer him up, for old times' sakes. Could've said something about killing the damn clown for him, joked about clown-on-clown violence, done a Voice. Could've made some other dumb joke, because that's something Richie does, he jokes around, he runs off at the mouth, *beep-beep, Richie, you're dying.*

But he hadn't. He'd looked Eddie in the eye with a smile as brittle as autumn leaves and said, *God, I loved you so much.* No Voices, no jokes, just Richie laying that last secret bare with his last breath.

Eddie comes to a stop, hand grasping blindly till he finds a tree to hold onto, squeezing his eyes shut in a vain attempt to hold the tears back. *Your heart beats next to mine, wouldn't it be nice, if you're lost you can look and you will find me time after time, the beating of our hearts is the only sound*, all those songs, all the jokes, all the lingering touches—add them all up, you get *I loved you so much.* Richie's been saying *I love you* for goddamn years. Eddie should've heard it earlier than he did. Maybe had, but mistook it for the beat of his own heart. Instead he heard it and knew it too late, and when he came back to Richie he was gone, gone, gone, finally, where Eddie couldn't follow, where Richie would never hear him say it back.

He can now, he knows that. He hopes Richie knows he loves him back, even if the words still stick in his throat without someone dragging them out of him. But even now, the grief swells up from his heart and chokes him, the way it did in those first horrible weeks afterwards. It still fucking hurts even knowing that Richie's in the sewers waiting to be rescued, almost alive. In some ways it's worse.

Grief doesn't give half a shit what's rational and what's not, Eddie's learned that. All he can do is bend over and just *breathe*.

Just breathe, Eds. Just breathe through it. He drags in a shaky breath then sighs it back out, one, two, three. By the time he straightens back up, his vision has stopped swimming, and if his eyes are puffy from crying, well, no one's going to notice. It's his day off.

He runs back. The Teen Queens come on as he's running back, and of all fucking things to hear as his feet slap against the ground, it has to be this: *Eddie my love, I love you so, how I wanted for you, you'll never know. Please, Eddie, don't make me wait too long...*

Making a digital version of his beloved mixtape to run to maybe wasn't the smartest idea, Eddie figures. By the time he's back at the townhouse, the grief and regret and guilt have smacked him over the head at least twice more, and he's just about ready to crawl back into bed and take advantage of his day off to fuckin' *sleep*.

He opens the door to his bedroom, and stops in his tracks right there in the doorway. The message is gone, the wall mysteriously scrubbed clean, but a red rose lies on one of his bleached-white pillows, its stem scraped clean of thorns.

"You sap," he says, out loud, unable to stop himself from smiling at the sight of it. He makes up his mind, then: later. He'll tell Richie later. It can't be that hard, it's just four words, *I love you too*.

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Eddie closes his eyes. Moments later, or at least it feels like moments to him, he opens them again to find himself standing outside a squat black building, with IMPROV COMEDY CLUB printed in large, Hollywood-style letters where he can't miss it.

It's a hot summer's day. He can practically feel his feet cooking even in their sensible shoes. It's not a hard decision to make, between the club and the sun—he goes inside, because at least the club probably has drinks and air conditioning. Sure enough, he's blasted with cold air the second he walks inside the—the empty building.

Well. Of course it's empty. It's a dream. Eddie ducks into one of the side bars to find Richie sitting there at the counter, wearing Eddie's old jacket, the red one he lost in the sewers. It hadn't hid the blood as well as it ought to have, turning dark with it and soaking through onto Eddie's hand.

"Did you get the rose?" Richie asks, as Eddie hops into a bar stool next to him. There's a glass of something amber in front of him, but he isn't touching it just yet. A turtle is snoozing down the counter, god only knows where it came from.

From one eyeblink to the next, a Long Island iced tea somehow pops into existence in front of Eddie.

"Neat trick," says Eddie, and wants to smack himself for it. *Neat trick?* God-fucking-dammit, he's forty years old, he should be able to come up with better than that! "Yeah, I—I got the rose."

"I got it from my mom's old flower shop," Richie confesses, a hint of his old mischief flickering in his eyes. "Remember, we used to play there all the time, and she'd tell us not to play rough 'cause we'd knock the pots over? Remember when we were seven and we *did*?"

God, does Eddie remember. "She was *so fucking mad*," he says. "She grounded you for a week, didn't she?"

"Yeah!" says Richie. "Yeah, it felt like the end of the world, she specifically said I couldn't go see you. I couldn't see anyone but I definitely could not go see you. I was so fucking *miserable* about that until you came through my window."

Eddie laughs, remembering it now: he'd snuck out of the house and biked as hard and as fast as he could on his little bicycle, sticking cotton in the bell so it wouldn't give him away. He'd even hidden his bike behind a big bush, and then clambered up the tree the way Richie had shown him just weeks ago, trying very hard not to look down. Then he'd scrambled across the branch and knocked on Richie's window, and hissed, *Let me in! Let me in! Why did you take the highest fucking window I'm gonna fall and my brains are gonna splatter out onto the ground let me in!* Richie had let him in, eyes wide, and then hugged him fiercely. "I remember," he says. "I didn't look down

the whole time, I thought I was gonna die if I did. You know, I think your mom almost saw me?”

“She totally saw you,” Richie assures him. “She just didn’t wanna fuck up your knight in shining armor routine.”

“What does that make you, the princess in the tower?” Eddie asks.

“Fuck no, I’d be a shitty princess,” says Richie. “It makes me the thing sealed away in the tower that only the purest of hearts can touch, or some shit like that.”

“What the fuck kind of movies did you watch when you were seven,” Eddie marvels. “That’s really fucking specific.”

“The same kind you did,” says Richie. “I just paid more attention than you did.”

“Because we’d watch at nine and I’d be falling asleep by that time!” Eddie huffs, smacking Richie’s shoulder. “It’s a miracle I even stayed awake for your shitty fantasy movies. Or some kind of testament.”

“To what?” Richie asks, tilting his head. His eyes are fixed on Eddie’s, his eyes are blue, and his hand reaches for Eddie’s, fingers settling over Eddie’s knuckles. Waiting. He’s had practice, Eddie remembers, thirty years’ worth of it. God. Eddie wants to lean over and kiss his lips, wants to take him to bed, wants to pull him close and never let him go. Wants everything, with Richie. All he has to do is to say it.

How much I love you. I love you. I love you. The words stick in his throat, unable to leave even when Eddie tries his best to push them out.

“How badly I was bothered by that spring in your mattress poking into my ass,” Eddie says instead.

Richie laughs, squeezing Eddie’s hand. “The spring gave my mattress *character*,” he says, and if he’s disappointed, he isn’t letting it show. Used to be Richie was an open book Eddie could read, but 27 years apart have added new chapters and rewritten old pages, and now Eddie’s trying to find where he left off. Maybe trying to start over.

Eddie squeezes back, and hopes that's enough for now, at least for Richie. It's not enough for Eddie, not as good as the words that keep sticking in his throat, refusing to come out. "It also gave me insomnia," he says. "How you could sleep on that bed I'll never understand."

"Like a baby," Richie says. "Not my fault you were a sensitive old man even at seven."

"Well, I guess that explains a lot," Eddie says, "at seven you acted like you were two years old."

"You dick," says Richie, fondly, rubbing a thumb over Eddie's knuckles. Eddie swallows, at the sustained contact, half-certain his heart might just claw its way out of his ribcage.

"Where are we, anyway?" Eddie asks, changing the subject away from their shared childhood, the bittersweet memories they'd forgotten when they left Derry.

"Hollywood Improv," says Richie. "I used to come here all the time, do sets, sometimes sketches with other people." He nods to the stage just beyond them, empty with only a microphone stand in the middle, waiting for someone to get up on stage. "It's a good place to go, if you're the type who wants drinks with your comedy," he says. "I thought about the Groundlings Theater, but it'd just be empty and depressing without anybody else inside. You wouldn't like that. I wanna take you to places that aren't majorly depressing when empty, so—" He shrugs. "Here we are. This is the first time ever I've seen this place empty. Maybe one day you'll see it with the crowd in."

"Maybe you could introduce me to a couple of people," says Eddie. "I mean, you've got friends, I've seen you on TV, you talk about them."

Richie smiles, a sad little thing. "Not a lot of friends like the Losers," he says. "None at all, probably. And definitely no one like you, ever." No one, Eddie realizes, who would crawl through Richie's window for the sole purpose of keeping him company when he was grounded, or sick, or just didn't want to be alone. Richie takes a sip of his whiskey, and says, matter-of-factly, "I don't think a single fucking one of them would be as worried as you guys are about me. I know my

management wouldn't."

"You heard?" Eddie asks.

"I mean, I knew from the start, kinda," says Richie. "It's Hollywood, man, it's just the business."

Just the business. *No one like you*. They've both been so lonely, but Eddie at least had a few people he could talk to, sometimes, that Myra didn't really know. No one on the level of the Losers, never anyone else, but there were people who passed in and out of his life that he considered good friends. He wonders if Richie even had that much.

Then again, there's the elephant in the room he's been trying to cover, the one they've been tiptoeing around. Maybe he didn't. Eddie can still remember the way his mother used to watch them when they grew older, like she didn't like how close Richie would get, and he knows Richie didn't touch a lot of other boys as much.

"God, Rich," says Eddie, softly, squeezing his hand, his heart cracking for Richie. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," says Richie, smiling again, and this one doesn't reach his eyes, "I'm fine. Really, Eds."

"No, hey," says Eddie, then, "C'mere, asshole." He tugs on Richie's hand, to urge him closer, and miracle of miracles, Richie goes. "I'm sorry," he says, wrapping his arms around Richie and pulling him as close as he can. This close, he smells cheap deodorant and roses, the musty odor of the clubhouse the last time the seven of them had been inside it together. This close, Richie just feels warm. "I'm sorry that no one crawled through your window to keep you company."

"Kinda hard," Richie croaks, his voice breaking even as he tries to sound casual and light, "since my apartment's on the 19th floor. Or it used to be. I think I don't have it anymore."

Eddie just hugs him tighter, biting back his instinctive answer. This is important, and maybe he can't say *I love you*, but he can say something else instead. He can say *you are not alone*. "Rich," he says,

stroking over his back. “Richie. I’m right here. I’m not going anywhere.”

Richie doesn’t say anything. But he leans in close and wraps his arms around Eddie, hugging back tightly and slumping against him till his face is buried in Eddie’s chest, as if he’s scared It will yank him away once more. He sniffles, and Eddie shuts his eyes, because goddammit they’re *both* going to cry, aren’t they. Well, whatever. He clings tight to Richie, unwilling to let him go, and holds him as Richie’s shoulders start to shake.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Eddie says, and is surprised to find he means it. If he has to stay in Derry then so be it. He can be brave enough to do that. He can be brave enough to stay, for however long it takes. “I’m staying right here, right fucking here until we can get you out.” *I love you.*

Richie makes a noise into his shirt, then looks up and blinks at him. He leans back up again, one hand letting go of Eddie’s shirt to press against his face, and asks hesitantly, “Eds, is it okay if I—”

Eddie leans in close to kiss him, before he can think better of it. Richie freezes up instantly, eyes going wide, and oh, fuck, Eddie’s done something wrong, hasn’t he? He breaks away then and says, “Shit, Rich, I’m sorry, I knew you had a—a thing about touch—”

“Do that again,” Richie says. “I wasn’t ready that time.” Then he laughs, almost breathless with it. “Am I ever ready for you, though?” he asks. “I’ve been holding this torch for goddamn forever, I dunno how to put it down.”

“Let me hold it with you, then,” says Eddie, and tugs him in close to kiss him again, in an empty bar in LA, in a dream that feels real enough for him. Stan had given him and the other Losers the letters that would’ve been sent out when he died, and had given Eddie Richie’s letter. *Be who you want to be. Be proud. And for god’s sake, Richie, tell him, he’ll always care about you.* Stan’s always been a perceptive one.

Richie goes, closing his eyes this time to kiss back, tender and gentle. Eddie was expecting him to be a lot of things for their first kiss, but

somehow *tender* did not, in fact, register as any of them. But he is tender, even gentle, like he's handling something precious and doesn't want to break it, doesn't want to disrespect it in any way.

Eddie doesn't think he's ever been kissed like this. Myra's kisses were perfunctory, the kind of thing they wanted over with as soon as possible so they could get on with their day. His girlfriends definitely never kissed like this, like kissing Eddie's an act of reverence, done gladly, with the scrape of stubble against his bare skin. Eddie threads his fingers to Richie's hair, leans back in the stool as far as he can go without toppling over so Richie can crowd in, touch him, god, Richie is *touching him* and Eddie's a fucking livewire under his own skin.

Eventually they have to break away from each other, and Richie looks floored, to say the least, eyes wide and grin dopey. "Where'd you learn to kiss like that?" he asks.

"It's a dream," says Eddie, loftily, "I'll kiss however I want."

"Mm, fair," says Richie. His hand wanders into Eddie's hair, and Eddie shivers at his touch. This should've been his first kiss. This should've been his wedding kiss. Electricity thrums under his skin where Richie is touching him, his nerves alight. He knows he's asleep, right now, but he's never felt more alive, more like flying, than he does right now. "Hang on, does this count as our first kiss? Does anything we do in dreams like this count?"

Richie's got a point, actually. "Yes?" Eddie ventures, after mulling it over for a half-minute. "This is—a weird arcade token dreamscape thing, not just a regular dream. I'll remember this when I wake up."

"Oh," says Richie. He smiles. "I'll count it, then."

"You had better," Eddie huffs, and kisses him again.

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When Eddie wakes up, the arcade token is warm against his skin. He smiles into his pillow, and breathes out easy.

Yeah. That counts.

8. a dream i'm drowning in

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from Noah Gundersen's "Wake Me Up, I'm Drowning".

content warnings: canon-typical horror, a la Jade of the Orient, and therefore disturbing imagery with it. some somewhat minor injury to a major character. parental death in backstory. brief references to Eddie's leper and to Bev's father. Pennywise calling Ben a fatboy in a derisive manner.

Bev shows up at the library a few days later, grim determination set into her face, an engagement ring dangling around her neck, waiting for him in the lobby. When Eddie asks where Ben is, she jerks a thumb to the car parked right outside, where, sure enough, Ben's in the driver's seat, reading a book, and, surprisingly, Stan in the passenger seat looking *deeply* uncomfortable. "He's going to drive us to my old place, where my dad and I used to live," she says. "I think—there's something there."

"Your old place?" Eddie asks, feeling more than a little queasy about the prospect. The last time he was in Bev's old apartment, the one she shared with her father, there had been blood all over the bathroom. Like, *all over it*. Also, it had been just, like, a really bad place overall, he'd been about ready to squirm out of his skin the whole time, unsure whether it was over the danger Al Marsh posed or the blood in the bathroom or just the fear of It worming its way into Eddie's heart.

"When we were getting our tokens," she says, "I—saw something there."

"Didn't we all see something?" Eddie asks. "I saw the leper, Bill saw Georgie, Richie saw something he doesn't talk about. Why's this so special?"

Bev hesitates. "Because unlike with the rest of us," she says, quietly,

"I think It was telling me something. Stan, too, when he hit the synagogue last time." Her manicured fingers tap against the wooden counter, and Eddie shoots the intern in charge of the counter an apologetic look, wishing quietly that Jeff were here. Jessica, he thinks this girl's name is—Jessica Hill, senior at Derry High. Her eyes are fixed on him and Bev as if they're characters in a play that's entralling her. "Have you ever heard of someone named Bob Gray?"

A cold chill runs down Eddie's spine at the name, as the memory of the leper bubbles back up. *I'll do it for free. Bobby does it for a dime, he will do it any time. That's me, Eddie.* "Yeah," he says, shaking off the fear that creeps up his spine, "the leper."

"Not just that," says Bev. "You're working at a library, there's public records there. Did you ever come across someone named Robert Gray? Did Richie ever mention him to you?"

Not while we were making out and chatting over burgers, no. Eddie doesn't say that, though, just shakes his head instead. Unbidden, Richie's words float back up to the surface of Eddie's memory: the people who see the Deadlights get marked as potential hosts. Like Bev, and Stan. Like Richie had been. It was only the luck of the draw that Richie was the closest body—luck, and Richie wanting Eddie to live.

"This Robert Gray," says Eddie, quietly, "was he—was he Pennywise, first, before It was?"

Bev shrugs, crossing her arms across her chest and huffing out a breath. "I don't know," she admits. "Maybe. I don't think I can trust what It was showing me, and I know Stan doesn't either. But I think there must've been *some* truth to what I saw, and I'm hoping to find out for sure."

"Well, okay," says Eddie. "Why bring me along? I don't—I don't really know what I can do."

"You can talk to Richie," says Bev. "You've been talking to Richie. Maybe he could drop clues for us, something we can use to get him out of there." She nods to the doors leading into the library's study hall, and says, "Or we could go into the public records here. Did Mike

ever get those digitized?”

“He was working on it, I think,” says Eddie. “He passed it over to Cathy when he resigned. So far she’s gotten pretty far ahead on it.”

“Can you check?” Bev asks.

“I have a phone and a pretty good data plan, I can try,” says Eddie. “Just let me get out of here first, I have to delegate a few things I was working on, then I’m all yours.”

So he leaves Bev at the counter with one very distracted Jessica, narrowly avoids Dash the intern on the way, and rushes to his office to save his work on his laptop. One of his other coworkers volunteers to take care of the repair guys when they come by later today, and the rest have been ruthlessly recruited into making the upcoming fundraiser look attractive to the townsfolk of Derry, so Eddie doesn’t feel too guilty about leaving them alone with the work. By the time he comes back to Bev, she’s struck up a chat with Jessica, who looks *fascinated*.

“—Mr. Kaspbrak’s like to you?” Jessica’s asking.

“Like family,” says Bev. “The closest thing I have.”

Eddie’s heart grows three sizes right there in his chest. The Losers, he realizes, are perhaps the closest thing he’s got to family too—the kind you’re supposed to have, that you would do anything for, and that you know beyond a shadow of a doubt would do anything for *you* too. (Even die.) He coughs to get Bev’s attention, and says, “Okay, can we go now?”

They go. Bev hops into the passenger seat next to Ben. Eddie kicks a pebble into the sewer to warn Richie to stay in the clubhouse for a couple of hours, clambers into the backseat with Stan and says, “I didn’t think you’d come down here without everyone else around.”

“Neither did I,” Stan says. “But Bev asked.” He glances over at the sewer and says, “You’re sure Richie’s going to come talk to us at Bev’s old place?”

“I wasn’t telling him to talk to us,” says Eddie, as Ben starts the car

up again and pulls away from the curb. "Today's—not a good day, let's say. I asked him to stay clear."

"That's not a bad choice," says Stan. "I think we'd stand a better chance of finding something useful if Richie's chaperone isn't there to fuck with us."

Bev twists around in her seat up front, and says, "You think he'll stay away?"

Eddie hesitates. "I didn't get an answer," he admits. "But I know he'll try."

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Ben pulls up near the rundown, shuttered-up building that once upon a time used to be Bev's dad's home, and says, "Stan, do you wanna come with? You could stay out here and keep the car running."

"Don't tempt me," says Stan. "I absolutely don't want to be here, but—I have to come with." He sounds so sure of this, and moreover, so *annoyed* he's so sure of this. Good old Stan, always wanting Derry to make even the barest lick of sense when Derry doesn't want to. "This won't work if all of us aren't there."

"All of us?" Eddie asks, briefly scanning the area for Bill, or Mike, or even Richie.

"All the Losers in town but Richie," says Bev.

"All right," says Ben, turning the engine off. "Let's do this, then."

Eddie digs out a tiny bottle of hand sanitizer from his fanny pack and presses it into Stan's hands, after they climb out of the car. "You never know what you're going to be picking up in there," he says. "So, you know. Better safe than sorry." He pulls another two out of the same pack, and tosses one to Bev, who's grimly staring up at the building, and to Ben, who's holding her hand and staring soulfully at her. "You two lovebirds too," Eddie says. He glances up at the building, a broken and ramshackle shade of what it used to be, and shivers. "Who's going first?"

“Me,” says Bev, striding forward. Ben falls in behind her, with Eddie and Stan taking up the rear. Eddie lingers on the final step for a moment, looking around for a red rose, a red balloon, something that’ll tell him who’s in charge right here and right now. This is one of *Its* places, he remembers that.

He doesn’t see anything. He turns away, then, and heads inside.

(A red balloon rises out of an alleyway, a heartbeat after Eddie closes the door behind him, then floats up, up, up towards the sky.)

“Well,” says Ben, pleasantly, as Eddie catches up to them, “I hate this place on principle.”

“I know, it’s structurally unsound,” says Bev, amused, and Ben smiles at her. “You weren’t designing it, unfortunately.”

“I was thirteen, nobody’d have taken my portfolio then,” he says. “So—where do we go?”

As if to answer that, the arcade token resting against Eddie’s skin, under his clothes, grows warm. Eddie pulls it out, lets the token rest against his palm, and *sees* the route in his head, clear as day: up the stairs, fourth door on the left side, MARSH not KERSH. He frowns. “Marsh, not Kersh?” he says, out loud, and Bev glances sideways at him.

Stan rocks back on his feet, shooting the door behind them an anxious look. But he sets his jaw, and says, “Your old man’s place?”

“Yeah,” says Bev. “When I went there, Mrs. Kersh was there, but—well, you know.” She pushes a few strands of hair back behind her ears, looking up the stairs. “Everyone go one at a time behind me and just—be careful. The stairs worked when I was last here, but without *Its* influence, I’m not sure if it can support all of us.”

“I’ll go behind Bev,” says Stan, suddenly.

“I’ll be right behind Stan,” says Eddie, and moves closer to Stan to clap him on the shoulder and give him a reassuring squeeze. “You’re braver than you think you are, Stanley,” he says. *You’re braver than you think*, Richie’s voice echoes in the back of his head, and for a

moment Eddie's back in Neibolt, and Richie's smiling at him, so sure of *Eddie* of all people that it knocks him for a loop. No one's believed in him like that. No one's looked at him and called him *brave* and, moreso, *encouraged* it.

He blinks, and he's back in the old apartment building, looking at Stan instead. Stan's looking back, too, and there's something in his eyes that's almost *knowing*. That's right, Stan had heard them too.

"Well," says Ben, "I guess I'm right behind you guys."

Marching orders thus decided, they head upstairs, with Eddie taking extra care to look where he's stepping. The arcade token pulses warmly under his clothes, and he ends up fishing it out and holding it in his hand, watching it glow faintly, beating like a heart.

When he joins Bev on the second floor, she looks down at his token and blinks. "Mine's not doing that," she says, holding up her wrist. Sure enough, hanging from her bracelet is a single arcade token, very conspicuously not glowing.

Eddie thinks of roses, left just for him, and says, "Maybe the ritual worked in some way after all." They'd believed it would defeat Pennywise. It hadn't worked then, but maybe it had done something to the tokens that had been used. Maybe. Eddie's flying blind here, hasn't got a map or an instruction manual, just gut instinct.

"And here Ben, Stan, Bill and I took *flammable* tokens," says Bev. "More fool us."

"My inhaler would be way harder to duplicate for you and Stan," says Eddie, "and I'm not lugging a rock from the rock fight around." He turns in one direction and says, as the glow grows brighter, "This way?"

"This way," says Bev, as Stan climbs up to join them.

"Oh," Stan says, with a look on his face like he's tasted a rancid lemon in his lemonade, "yours glows now?"

"Apparently," says Eddie. "I don't know *why*."

Ben, the last one to come up the stairs, steps carefully. The stairs creak anyway, and one near the top cracks before Ben can put his full weight on it. He pulls back, and the wood falls away. Then the next step. Then the next, and suddenly there's a gap between Ben and them, and Ben steps back, eyes wide as he looks down at the pit where four of the stairs used to be. A *deep* one, and Eddie's heart lurches when he sees it. A fall from that height could kill, sure as spit.

"*Shit*," Ben says, having apparently reached that same conclusion. He backs up as Bev pushes her way closer, holds her hand out. "I'm gonna jump," he says, looking down and gulping audibly, because the gap is beginning to widen, yawning open wider and wider. Impossibly so, in fact.

"I'll catch you," says Bev. "*We'll* catch you."

Ben's jaw sets, and he nods. He backs up, and then runs as the stairs crumble under his feet, jumping off as the last of the wood rots away in some real-life time-lapse bullshit—eaten up by termites faster than it should be. Bev reaches out—

Stan grabs hold of Bev's waist as she leans out, to steady her, and Ben's hand just *about* catches onto the edge of the last stair. Bev seizes his arm first, then Eddie, and finally Stan pulls at Bev's waist.

Eddie wheezes out a strained curse, because god *damn*, Ben's a fully-grown adult man and he weighs like one, but somehow, *somehow*, the three of them manage to pull Ben up and over the edge, back onto solid ground. Or solid floor. Before their eyes, the stairs rise back into place, as though they never cracked open.

"I hate this place," Stan says, fervently. "I fucking *hate* it."

"You and me both," Eddie mumbles, feeling the strain in his lungs and patting around for his inhaler instinctively. "Fuck. I *told* Richie not to go near the place."

"We're clearly not dealing with Richie here," says Stan, his face pale and drawn, "Richie's jokes are pretty bad but he wouldn't try to kill Ben."

Ben picks a few splinters out of his hand, hissing quietly. “Eddie told Richie to stay away,” he says, as if putting the pieces together. “But he didn’t tell *It* to stay away, did he. And when it heard that we were coming here, the four of us—”

“—it couldn’t resist,” says Bev, finishing Ben’s sentence. Eddie’s heart, and incidentally his lunch, scrabbles up into his throat at the very thought of having to go up against *It* *again*, the old fear scraping along his spine. He swallows the whole tangled mess back down.

“Okay, sit down, I can’t watch you fuck up your hand,” says Eddie, nudging Bev so she’ll step aside. “I’ve got a spare pair of tweezers and some alcohol, but I’m gonna need you to stay still while I patch you up.”

“We’re not going anywhere,” says Bev, taking Ben’s other hand and squeezing. He smiles back, and rests his arm on her shoulders, tucking her under his arm as Eddie works the splinters out of his hand.

Stan doesn’t sit down, just paces the floor while Eddie’s working. “This was *Its* place,” he says, fussing with his sleeves, eyebrows knitting together like he’s turning something over in his head, analyzing the emerging patterns. “Richie didn’t come with us to clean up Beverly’s bathroom, we never hung out here. He doesn’t have a claim on this place, *we’ve* never staked a claim, but *It* does.”

“We’re claiming territory now?” Ben asks.

Eddie thinks of the clubhouse, of Richie looking more settled in his own skin. “We claimed territory years ago,” he says. “When we won the rock fight.” Something fundamental in the world had shifted, then, when Henry and his goons slunk away, bleeding and concussed from the rocks the Losers had tossed at them. The Barrens had stopped seeming so easy to get lost in, had stopped looking so dangerous to the Losers. Had become *theirs*, in truth. *The Barrens is ours, that’s why Richie went there. The clubhouse is ours more than our homes ever were.*

Derry in general, though—that’s *Its* territory. Pennywise’s hunting grounds. The Losers had chased it out twice, they’ll chase it out

again, but It'll put up a fight the whole time. Has been putting up a fight, making sure they know when they're trespassing, *taking one of theirs*. Motherfucking clown.

"If we're in enemy territory now," Bev says, and for a moment Eddie sees her at thirteen, yelling at them to stop fighting, shouting that they faced the thing *together* and that was how they survived, "then we need to stick together. We're stronger that way."

Eddie pulls out the last splinter from Ben's hand, and fishes around for cotton and alcohol in his fanny pack. *Easier said than done*, he thinks, uneasy, disinfecting Ben's wounds as much as he can.

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Walking through the broken-down shade of Bev's old apartment building, as it turns out, is barely any better than wading through the sewers of Derry. Sure, there's no grey water up here, but the wood creaks under their feet and the rats scurry around them, and is that really any better?

Another rat squeaks on past. Eddie very discreetly grabs hold of Stan, his other hand holding the arcade token. It's glowing brightly now, so bright that Eddie's surprised it's not trying to burn a hole in his hand.

"Here," says Bev, stopping at a door with MARSH written on the plaque. "This was where she and I talked, where I saw the picture with her father. I saw her father—I saw *Pennywise* just down the hall." She nods towards the end of the hall, and says, "There was a door there, and when it swung open I saw—It. Or not *just* It, but the man that It used as a host. I'm sure of it."

Ol' Bobby Gray, Eddie thinks. Try as he might, when he thinks the name, he only sees the leper's noseless, rotting face. And he only sees a fire exit at the end of the hall, the light behind the sign long since burned out. Behind that door is, most likely, if It isn't messing with them, the fire escape he and the other boys used to leave the building, so long ago, creeping out of Bev's apartment.

Ben doesn't bother with the doorknob, just eases the door open.

The smell of rot all but explodes out of the room. Bev steps back, more out of shock than anything as her hand claps over her mouth and nose, and Eddie doesn't blame her for that. God, it *reeks* in there.

There had been a time back in college, when Eddie's first roommate had accidentally left some meat out to rot too long in their dorm, for reasons Eddie's forgotten now. The smell had stuck to the counter, persistent even when Eddie tried to chase the scent away with perfume and air freshener. It had lasted far longer than the roommate did, and eventually Eddie had to move out and get a different dorm.

The too-sweet, rotten-eggs reek that's just burst out of Bev's dad's old apartment is about a thousand times worse than that. Eddie doesn't doubt that were Richie here, he'd have yartzed his guts up, but as things stand, it looks like either Stan or Eddie himself might just do the honors instead. Eddie might, because—because under the stench of rotting meat, he smells cologne. Shitty cologne. *Richie's* cologne.

Ben pulls his shirt up over the lower half of his face. "Did this happen last time?" he asks.

"Yeah, *no*," says Bev, her face tinged faintly green.

Ben's first over the threshold, keeping his shirt pressed firmly over his mouth and nose. Bev takes one step forward before the door *slams* closed on them, and she's the first one to fling herself at the door, shouting, "Ben! *Ben!*"

Eddie swears, grabs hold of the doorknob and—ow, fuck, *shit*, that's too fucking *hot*. He yanks his hand back and stares, horrified, at the imprint of the doorknob burned into his skin.

Stan whips around first, and steps in front of Eddie. Eddie's about to ask him what the fuck is going on when the fire exit opens up and—and *things* rush through: human heads with spider-like legs sprouting out of their eyes and cheeks, winged grey things that look and cry like dead, barely-formed babies, eyeballs slithering along the floor like snakes with bloody nerves trailing behind them, dead puppies with their exposed and rotting guts dragging on the floor hauling their asses towards them with hunger in their maggot-ridden eyes.

“Oh, fuck!” Bev curses, and steps forward to start angrily kicking as the swarm descends on them.

Eddie ducks his head to protect his face from the things and says, “Oh god oh god oh my fucking *god*—”

There’s the sound of Stan swatting something out of the air, and a wet noise. “Oh, that’s disgusting,” says Stan, faintly.

Eddie peeks, just in time to see Stan upending his bottle of hand sanitizer onto his hand. Also just in time to see one of the winged fetuses try to divebomb him, and Eddie instinctively bats it away.

Ben’s scream echoes from inside the room. Eddie turns on his heel, tries not to think about what he and Bev and Stan might be squashing under their feet, and rushes to the door. He tentatively touches only the very tip of his pinky finger to the doorknob.

It *burns*.

He yanks it back with a curse, then knocks his fist against the door with a curse. Ben’s in there. He can’t leave him there, he *can’t*, something’s in there with him and it’s *hurting him*. “We’re coming to get you, Ben!” he shouts. Then he backs up and slams into the door, shoulder-first. Then again, with Bev’s weight behind it. Then again, with Stan and Bev.

Then, as suddenly as they came, the monstrosities drop to the floor. The door swings open, and all three of them tumble through, graceless and clumsy. “Ow,” Eddie groans, with the weight of two fully-grown adults on his back. “Ow, *fuck*—”

He looks up and blinks.

Richie’s there. Richie, with white paint fading from his face, his glasses in Ben’s hand, his eyes wide and horrified, with Ben holding him by the wrist. *Richie*, and Eddie knows it’s him because It would never bother to look like that, guilty and scared beyond belief. Ben’s taken his glasses off his face, and there’s blood dripping down Ben’s forearm where—

—where three long gashes are.

“Ben!” Bev shouts. “Oh my god—Richie, what—”

“Ben, you gotta let go,” Richie says. “I—I can’t stay—”

“Rich,” says Ben, desperately, “Richie, it’s okay, it’s fine, it wasn’t you—”

Richie yanks his hand back and away from Ben, making a wounded, desperate noise as he backs up, scooting back on his ass. Stan’s on him in an instant, pushing past Eddie and Bev to grab hold of Richie’s arm this time, and Richie goes still and quiet, eyes flickering gold. Out in the hallway, the monsters start to stir. Wings beat sluggishly, squashed eyeballs struggle towards the open doorway.

Eddie grabs Richie’s other hand, and the monsters drop back to the floor, dead. The blue seeps back into Richie’s eyes, and the white paint flakes off his skin. “Hey,” Eddie says, snapping the fingers of his free hand in front of Richie’s pale face, “hey, Richie, *hey*.”

“Bev, that you?” Richie asks, with a ghost of his old humor in his voice.

“You fuckin’ *wish*, Trashmouth.”

Bev’s already at Ben’s side, stripping off her own jacket and tearing the sleeve off to wrap around his arm. The gashes are still there, but when Eddie turns his head to ask, Ben says, “It looks worse than it actually is. You didn’t go too deep.”

Richie’s face crumples. “Ben,” he says, then stops, and curls up. Eddie shifts his grip so he’s loosely holding Richie’s hand, and Stan’s hand travels up to settle on Richie’s shoulder instead, squeezing once, reassuringly. Neither of them look at the open wound in the middle of Richie’s chest, the blood that’s crusted around it. “How bad does it look? I can’t see it.”

“Not that bad,” says Ben.

“Don’t bullshit me,” says Richie. “Bev?”

Beverly hesitates as she ties off the makeshift bandage, then sighs. “It looks pretty bad,” she admits. “But it’s fine, we’re fine. Anyone asks,

a raccoon scratched him up.”

Richie laughs, at that, a short and startled thing escaping like a bird from a child’s grasp. Eddie squeezes his hand lightly, and knocks his knee against Richie’s. “Do you want to go?” Eddie asks.

Richie runs his teeth over his lower lip. They look reassuringly human. “I can’t stay long, I don’t wanna hurt any of you more than I already have,” he says. “But fuck, I don’t—I don’t wanna go either, it’s been way too long.” He turns to look at Stan and says, with fake reproach in his voice, “Especially you, Stanley! You never *call* me back anymore, you know, it’s breaking my heart.”

“Yeah, it’s over between us, Rich, sorry,” says Stan, deadpan. “I’d say thanks for the good times, but honestly I faked it every time.”

“*Ouch*,” says Richie, and just like that Eddie relaxes, because if Richie’s making terrible jokes about his sex life, then he’s okay. They’re okay. “I’m already dead, stop kicking me while I’m down.”

And *that* kills what little joy had been teased out into the atmosphere. Eddie’s heart sinks into his stomach at the memory, his grip on Richie’s hand tightening. Stan’s face goes from vaguely amused to *devastated*, the grief written so clearly across his face that he looks as old as they joked he was. Ben shakes his head, brows furrowing, and Bev’s lips press together into a thin line.

“Beep beep, Richie,” she says.

“I can’t joke about my own death?” Richie asks.

(blood soaks through his fingers through his jacket stains the wedding ring there’s so much of it how can the human body hold so much blood oh god no hey Richie shhh Richie you’re gonna be okay we’re gonna be okay look at me man look at me what do you want to say what—)

“We had to *watch* you die,” says Stan, testy enough that Eddie freezes a little. So does Richie, almost imperceptibly so if not for Eddie’s hand on his arm. Then Stan pauses, and scrubs a hand over his face, and says in a softer voice, “I know it sounds a little fucked up, but your dying was *incredibly* traumatic. For us and for you.”

Richie doesn't say anything, but he shakes his head, and turns to look at Eddie instead. "I can think of more traumatic shit than that, personally," he says, softly. Then he huffs out a breath and says, "Fine. Okay. Now can we pretend I didn't kill the mood?"

"Too late," says Eddie. "Mood's dead, and you killed it. Hope you're fucking proud of yourself, Trashmouth."

"I'll never be able to live with the guilt," says Richie, solemnly. Then he snickers, which kills that bit.

"Actually, Rich," says Bev, cutting in before Eddie can shoot back at him, "how much *do* you know? About Its history, I mean." Her eyes meet Richie's, and she says, with no fear in her voice, "About Bob Gray."

"Pennywise," says Richie. "The first one." He hunches in on himself, pulls a knee up to his chest and says, "Yeah, I know about him. It talked about him a few times."

"How much can you tell us, Rich?" Ben asks.

Richie looks up, and Eddie sees flecks of gold in his eyes. "I don't know," he says, and thank god, he still sounds like himself, and his eyes are still mostly blue, mostly human. "It could interrupt at any moment if it thinks I'm saying too much, but how about this—I'll give a sketch, but it's up to you guys to fill the rest of it in?"

That's not really ideal, but—well, beggars can't be choosers, and all that. And a sketch of a picture straight from the source is better than nothing. Eddie shrugs, says, "I'll take that deal. Bev?"

"A start's good enough for me," says Bev.

"And me," says Ben. "We'll put the rest of it together from there."

Stan doesn't say anything, but he nods.

Richie cracks his neck from side to side, then breathes out slow. "All right," he says, "gather 'round, folks, and I'll tell you a story about a clown and his daughter..."

--

Once upon a time there was a circus, and in that circus lived a clown that danced and his daughter.

The clown wished to retire from the circus life, and to take his daughter with him, but the daughter had grown up with the Big Top and the razzle-dazzle of the life and had fallen in love with it. The circus was in her blood, and she loved it with all of her heart. The clown, however, had fallen out of love with the circus, as these things go, and only wished now to be left in peace, left alone with his daughter to live without worry of where their next meals would be coming from, of where they would be going next and if they would be able to stay there. He knew that little girls needed something more stable than the Big Top, something steadier than the trapeze swing.

So, against her protests, the clown decided that the next town they would stop at was the one they would finally live in. This town was a little thriving town named Derry, where the Kenduskeag River ran, where they used to trap beavers and disappear in the winters, where monsters lived and lurked in the darkness and talked to little girls like the clown's daughter through the bubbling river. (Shut up, Eddie, I'm trying to be dramatic here, *Jesus*. Lemme tell the fucking story. Anyway.)

So it was that Pennywise the Dancing Clown's final shows took place in Derry. On the first day of his last few weeks, though, something terrible happened: his daughter, the most precious thing in the world to him, disappeared.

It broke her father, the clown. He refused to perform, and instead recruited some of his friends from the circus to help him look for his daughter: the strongman and the acrobat, clever and brave and so fucking foolish, when you really think about it. But they didn't know about the monster, and neither did the clown. They didn't know the monster had lured the daughter away, and they certainly didn't know that the clown's stubborn efforts to find her had caught the monster's attention. The monster lurked in their shadows for a time, watching and waiting, and little by little grew...*fond* of the clown. As fond as It could get, really, which just means it wanted him for something other than food.

It was an old monster, you see. (I *know* we know that already, but I'm trying to tell the story here, Eds.) It was wearing out the form it lived in, and it needed something new. Something that could contain it. And the three of them could, it thought. One of the three, anyway, because they had a touch of *fate* about them.

(Do not fucking ask me how It knew. I have no idea either. Someone give me my glasses back, I don't know who's asking what.)

The clown was no longer dancing, the monster saw. This was unacceptable. The monster knew the clown could dance, that was why it was interested in him in the first place. It wanted to dance like the clown did. It *wanted*, it wanted so much it would kill for it. And it could spare someone for it, for it had a plan.

The clown, the acrobat, and the strongman, in the meantime, looked for the clown's daughter. They found a trail of crumbs—*figurative* crumbs, Eddie, okay—that led them to a house built over a well.

...they got the girl out, the three of them working together. But they didn't get the clown out. At the last minute, the monster had taken the clown, and he told them to run. He told them to get out of there, and he would be just behind them, he promised. He promised his little girl he'd just be a moment, and he'd join her.

He was lying. It got him. And it got what it wanted.

They never found his body. They *looked*, but the only thing they ever found of him was the clown's white gloves. And blood. Quite a lot of blood, too much to survive the loss. And the bones of children, too.

And twenty-seven years later, the little girl, who was not so little anymore, heard stories about a clown in the darkness, with a red balloon, inviting little boys and little girls to the house that had been built on the well. And twenty-seven years after *that*, this same grown-up little girl heard her father's voice speaking to her through the pipes. He told her: come down, sweetheart. Come down to the river, down to the darkness. Come play with your father.

She came.

And the monster that used to be her father, or that was never her father but was wearing his face, a face she loved and trusted implicitly and above even her own instincts—

Well. I think you can guess, Bev my dear, how that ended.

--

"She floated," says Bev, her voice tearing through the blanket of horrified silence that's fallen over them. Eddie can picture it in his head, somehow: an old woman walking into the darkness, following her father's voice to meet her strange death.

Richie nods. At some point during the story, Ben had passed his glasses back to him, but he hasn't put them on just yet. "Like her father before her," he says, quoting but not quite sliding into a Voice. "I'm—I don't know if I can say more, guys. I'm already pushing it just sticking around here. It's a little," and he winces, as if dealing with the remnants of a painful migraine, "tetchy. I *really* need to go."

"If this is about It trying to eat me," Ben says, "that wasn't you, I know it wasn't you. I don't blame you. None of us do, Rich."

Richie cocks his head to the side and says, "What happens if **there's nothing left of *your old friend, fatboy—shit!***" He yanks his hands away then, scrambling backward. "Don't," he says, when Eddie starts forward, "don't, *don't*, Eds, I don't wanna hurt you." His eyes flick from Eddie to the others, fear in his eyes as he backs away, the color draining back out of his skin. "Let me go," he says. "I'll come back, I promise."

Eddie starts forward again, but Bev's fingers hook around his elbow and reel him away. "*Rich*," he says, voice cracking.

Richie backs up towards the kitchen, towards the darkness. He hesitates a moment, and Eddie sees his hand drifting slowly upward, reaching, *reaching*, frills sprouting from the sleeve of his leather jacket, nails growing sharp as claws—

Richie yanks his hand back like he's burned it, and says, softly, "I *promise*." Then he steps back into the darkness, and the long-dead

lightbulbs flicker so brightly that for a moment Eddie has to cover his eyes. Then they burn back out, and—

—there's nothing there.

Well. Not *nothing*, because lying on the floor is a single red rose.

9. do you really think that anybody will notice?

Notes for the Chapter:

title is from Wintersleep's "Search Party".

content warnings: bad parenting from Stan's father, probably counts as emotional abuse. canon-typical horror. Pennywise being its own warning, again. references to suicide attempt.

"Fuck," says Stan, succinctly, as the four of them troop out of the building. "And we still have to head to the synagogue after this."

"Do we have to?" Eddie asks.

"I wish we didn't," says Stan, "but I—" He pauses, then frowns, crossing his arms and idly scratching over his forearm, where a scar stretches over his wrist. "I just have a feeling," he says, sounding more annoyed than anything. Typical Stan. Never did like having to just go on feelings.

"Bad or good?" Bev asks, as Ben leans against her. She turns to him then and murmurs something in his ear, and Ben gives her a slight nod. "I'll drive us there," she says again, out loud. "After what happened in there—well, Ben's not going to drive."

"We're still heading in the synagogue together, though," says Ben. "Do you still know anyone there?"

Stan shakes his head, and says, "Almost everyone I knew from synagogue moved away from Derry years ago. Or died." He absently picks at the hem of his sleeves, fussing them back into order, and says, "Unless—Eddie, you're the one who moved here, do you by any chance happen to know anyone who could go to synagogue?"

Eddie racks his memory, then shakes his head. "No, sorry, just you," he says. "But you were the rabbi's son. That counts for something."

"Not much," says Stan, sounding so—*tired* all of a sudden. Eddie remembers, all of a sudden, coming over sometimes when they were

younger, before Georgie disappeared. Stan used to worry so much about living up to his father's expectations, about setting an example as the rabbi's son to the other children. *Not a good one, then*, Richie had said once, his big mouth running off again, and Eddie had shushed him frantically.

Stan's father meant well. Parents usually do, Eddie knows that his mother certainly just wanted him to be safe and protected from all harm. That doesn't mean they don't hurt their kids anyway, but it just means—they don't see the scars left behind.

"We'll back you up," Bev says, snapping Eddie out of his thoughts, "if you're worried It might still take an interest."

"We're not leaving you alone again, Stan," says Ben, with conviction.

Stan shakes his head. "I know, it's just that I don't have very good memories of the place," he says, "but you know what? I'm fine. I can deal with bad memories."

"Would anyone be inside the synagogue right now?" Ben asks, as Bev maneuvers him over to the passenger door. He goes without complaint, and when he does wince, Bev leans down to catch his lips in a brief kiss. "It's not Saturday."

The rose is heavy in Eddie's hand, suddenly. He tries not to think about the scrape of stubble on his skin, about counting Richie's freckles in an empty Hollywood bar, about a cold hand pressing into his and warming, little by little, under his skin.

"Just the rabbi right now, probably," says Stan. "Maybe a few people praying alone, at this time of day. There's nothing really happening right now." He pauses. "Or at least nothing should be," he says.

"It's gonna be weird if we all go in and we're not Jewish, huh?" Eddie says.

"Not really, people will be a little more shocked by Ben bleeding through his bandages than by *goyim* swinging by out of curiosity," says Stan. "Just look nonthreatening and no one will look twice, especially after I vouch for you. Which reminds me: Ben? Don't go

near anything, I do not want you to get in trouble with the rabbi, whoever he is.”

“Got it,” says Ben.

Bev slides into the driver’s seat, and that leaves the backseat for Eddie and Stan. For a while as she drives away from the boarded-up apartment building, no one says a word. At most, Ben rests his hand on the center console, an invitation for her to take it if she needs to.

Eddie finds himself staring down at the rose, rubbing his thumb lightly over a red petal. It’s fresh, but the thorns have been cut off with a careful hand. Like Richie didn’t want him to slice his thumb open handling it, like he bought it from a flower shop instead of just picking it from a rosebush—he’s seen a couple in the Barrens, he knows Richie could just walk a couple steps out from the clubhouse and pull a few.

It’s sweet of him. Eddie would not trust roses from the Barrens. God knows what he’d pick up from those things. He’d much rather have roses from a florist like Maggie Tozier was.

He says to Stan, quietly, looking up from his rose, “What did you see? In the synagogue. You never really said anything about it, we just assumed it was the woman from your painting.”

“I wish it was,” says Stan, leaning his head against the headrest. “Her, I could’ve dealt with. I wouldn’t have been happy to, but I could’ve dealt with her. No, what I saw was—closer to what Beverly saw, I guess. It’s hard to explain, it was—*strange*.” He glances at Bev, who’s placed her hand on Ben’s on the center console, then looks back at Eddie.

“I got this rose from my undead boyfriend who lives in the sewers,” says Eddie. “We’ve long since passed strange, Stan. We’re in Weirdsville now.”

The word startles a wet-sounding laugh out of Stan. “You’ve been hanging around him too long,” he says, and Eddie doesn’t have to ask who he means. Weirdsville is a *Richie* thing to say, usually with a newscaster accent, *strange things are happening in Weirdsville, Maine*

tonight, more at eleven! “All right. I’ll try.” He drums his shaking fingers against his thigh, and begins: “So I’d put off looking for my token until after you came back drenched in leper puke, and I knew I’d have to go at least *look...*”

--

The synagogue looked the same as it did in Stan’s memory, as he walked up to it. A little less imposing, perhaps, now that he was an adult, but still the same. The only thing that had really changed was what was written on the sign outside, an announcement for Robin Goldstein’s Bat Mitzvah this coming Saturday. Stan stood outside near the sign for a long moment, considering the merits of simply turning on his heel and walking the fuck away, getting in his car, and leaving Derry behind. Certainly there were quite a lot to mull over.

Patty, though. Patty would be disappointed in him. Would definitely be very unhappy if he told her what Mike had told them: that fighting It the first time had left something in their heads that would kill them, sure as spit, if they didn’t finish this *now*, this very year, this very week. He could not bring himself to disappoint her, not again. She’d cried enough.

And, hell, if he didn’t stay Richie would probably fucking implode just being around Eddie. Or kill himself via alcohol poisoning before the clown could get them.

So. Stan tucked his hands into the pockets of his nice, sensible cardigan and walked up the stairs, then pushed the doors to the synagogue open.

The interior hadn’t changed either, strangely empty as it was. Here was the hall where visitors could be received, unchanged from when his father took over the position of rabbi over three decades ago. There was the door to the synagogue’s main hall where Stan’s disaster of a Bar Mitzvah had taken place. He pushed that door open and saw—well, no one there. For a moment, though, he imagined it: himself on the raised podium, the microphone in his sweating hand, looking up at his father with steel in his spine for what felt like the first time in his life ever. Richie had been sitting in one of the pews, a spare kippah tucked over his hair, and the pride in his eyes was

magnified a hundred times over by the size and thickness of his glasses.

“Thanks for showing up, Richie,” Stan murmured to himself. Then he closed the door. He would not find his token there, he figured, but maybe—the rabbi’s office.

His feet still knew the way, somehow. The wonders of muscle memory, Stan supposed. There were other things to worry over, anyway, like why the synagogue seemed so *empty*. There should’ve been at least a couple other people around—assistants, students of the Torah, *anyone*, the synagogue was never truly empty in Stan’s memory. At least someone had to be here to keep an eye on things. Fucking Derry and its fucking vandals used to try and make the synagogue a regular target, after all, and there was no reason to believe that had changed even now.

He came to the door of the rabbi’s office with his heart pounding hard against his chest. It was here. It was here, he knew this in his bones. *You should’ve run*, he thought. *You should’ve died in the bath, you should’ve spared everyone the trouble. You’re not just scared, Stan, you’re fucking terrified because you know that behind door number one is a crack in the universe, a flaw in the system. You’ve known this since the woman in the painting grew fucking legs and tried to chew your face off.*

He wanted to run. He wanted so, so badly to run, and hide. Buenos Aires wasn’t far enough from Derry, fucking *Antarctica* wasn’t far enough. The only place far enough was the country on the other side of everything, the nothingness afterward. If there was nothing. If it was far enough.

He could imagine it in full color: turning away, getting in a car, and just booking it far away from Derry as fast as possible. He could also see how that would end: him in a bathtub, with no one there to pull him out, and the Losers’ dead bodies scattered all over a dark, damp cave.

That could not happen. Stan might be a coward, but he *could not* let his friends die to buy him twenty years’ worth of time. The rest of Derry could go hang for all he cared, but not the Losers. Not the first family he ever made himself.

He sucked in a breath to steady himself. “You can do this, Uris,” he said. “You did this at thirteen scared shitless. You can do this now.”

He pushed the door open.

The only thing that waited for him was his father’s office. It was the same as always: dim, neat, well-organized, with the only thing out of place being the crooked painting of the woman, and a book on a chair. Stan stepped closer, slowly, then picked the book up and flipped it open.

His old bird album. Fuck, he—he *remembered* this, he realized, suddenly. His father had looked over the album he’d carefully curated, the birds he’d spotted and painstakingly catalogued, and Stan had thought maybe, just maybe—his father liked birds, too. Surely he would be proud. Stan had *completed* the album, after all.

His father had looked the album over, said it was an impressive task—but not the one Stan was supposed to *do*. Then he’d thrown it into the trash can, and told Stan in no uncertain terms that he needed to grow up and leave behind childish things. He was going to be a man soon. He was supposed to have left behind childish things long ago.

Well, Stan was a man now, older and more tired and still as scared as he was when he was thirteen. Probably moreso, now. He hadn’t done as good a job at leaving behind childish things as he had hoped, because the shadow of himself at thirteen still hung over him: his promise, and the memory of It.

He tucked the bird-book into a pocket, and kept his gaze firmly away from the crooked painting. It didn’t matter if the painting was crooked. It didn’t. It *didn’t*. Nothing would happen if he just—walked out the door and left it alone. Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Everything would be just fine, there was nothing wrong here, other than that fucking clown, and so far besides the mess with the fortune cookies (*So Glad You All Could Make It*, fucking *hellclown*) It hadn’t even showed up that much.

It didn’t matter. It didn’t. *It didn’t*.

His hand was already on the doorknob before he stopped. Then he

turned on his heel and stalked towards the painting, trying to look at a speck in its dark background rather than the woman herself. He just—He just needed to straighten it out, push it just a little to the left—

His eyes flicked, almost involuntarily, to the woman.

Only she *wasn't* the same woman, not anymore. She wasn't even a woman.

Stan startled at the sight of a little girl, holding a red balloon, looking sadly at him. Her eyes were brown and watery, as though she had cried just before sitting for this painting. She wore a black dress with frills along her skirt and lacy sleeves, and her hair was a blonde mop combed carefully back, as though for a formal event. Her black blouse was torn over her heart, showing a white undershirt. Like she was mourning someone, Stan thought, but—why? How did he know this? Why did this girl seem almost familiar to him? He'd never met this girl in his life. Right?

(but you do know her Stanley don't you you've got an idea who she is)

Right?

She—She wasn't made of brushstrokes anymore. Those brown eyes of hers were *swimming* with sadness, the sort that said she had seen things beyond her apparent twelve years of age. Her blouse wasn't just the only thing torn about her anymore, her sleeves had been shredded, her skirt bloodied and dirtied as though she had been playing in the mud, and her shoes squelched as she stepped forward, greywater spilling out from them. The balloon floated above her head, swaying with a nonexistent wind. "I would've done anything too," she said, softly, stepping forward, and her voice was, illogically, a man's voice. Pennywise's voice, but not *Its*. "She was my little girl. I wanted her to grow up to be a woman, tall and strong. I would've done anything for her. I did. God help me, I did." The girl tilted her head. "Do you want to make a deal, Stanley?" she whispered in that illogical voice, reaching her hand out, and out of the darkness came a thousand small hands.

Stan screamed, turned the painting over and slammed it into the wall hard enough that it left a crack in the plaster. Then he ran out the

door, as fast as he could go. His car was still in the parking lot, he could get in it now and take his chances—

He knocked into a very tall, and very surprised Richie Tozier, instead. The two of them fell hard and sprawled out on the floor of the lobby, an undignified mess of limbs.

“Stanley?” Richie asked, as Stan adjusted himself. “What—Hey, you okay? Did you find your token yet?”

“I have to get out of Derry,” Stan said.

“Oh,” said Richie. “Right.” His hand caught Stan’s wrist, grip firm but not so tight it hurt. “Stan,” he said. “We’re all—I hate that I’m the one who’s gotta say this because like, ten minutes ago I was gonna book it to Reno—”

“That’s a smart choice,” said Stan. “I was thinking the Arctic. Fucking cold over there but maybe it’d be far enough.”

“Fuck the Arctic, man, people died there,” said Richie.

“Better the Arctic than *Derry*,” said Stan. “You don’t—You don’t understand, I don’t think I can *do this*. I’m a coward, Rich, I’m too scared to go down to the sewers and face—*It*. Not again. I don’t know if I can survive it.”

“Hey, no, hey, budge up a bit,” said Richie, pushing Stanley up and off him. Stan went, and Richie sat up, brushing dust off his stupid expensive-looking leather jacket. “We’re all fucking scared, Stan. I *just* told you I was about to buy out and head to Reno. But I stopped by here, and I—d’you remember your Bar Mitzvah?”

“Yeah, that was a disaster,” said Stan, running a hand through his hair.

“I didn’t think it was,” said Richie, his tone low as if he was confessing something. A corner of his mouth had quirked upward, in a small smile, like he was letting Stan in on the joke. “When you told your dad off and dropped that mic, why, I thought you were the coolest fucking person in the entire synagogue.” His hand found Stan’s shoulder and squeezed, gentle and firm. People liked to say

Stan, at thirteen, was old for his age and Richie was too damn gleefully childish to hang out with, but Stan had seen Richie with Eddie. There was an *empathy* inside Richie, beyond the impressions and the dick jokes, that meant sometimes Richie knew just what to say to calm someone down. Or rile them up to the point of distraction. “You remember what you said?” Richie asked now.

“I’m a Loser,” said Stan, the words coming back to him after all these years. “And I always fucking will be.”

“Yeah,” said Richie. He patted Stan on the shoulder, then got to his feet. “Now come on, they’re probably having an orgy back at the townhouse right now.”

“You fucking asshole,” said Stan, fondly, pushing himself up to his feet as well. “Let’s go talk to Mike. We’ve got the tokens now, we can wait up on them at the library.”

--

“And, well,” says Stan, as Bev carefully parks them near the synagogue, “you know what happened at the library.”

Eddie does know, remembers with a horrifying clarity: Bowers’ body with an axe buried in his head, Richie heaving his guts up onto the floor, Stan helping Mike up and trying not to look. “Do you think we’re in for a repeat performance if we walk in there?” he asks, pushing his train of thought into a different, less bloody track.

“No,” says Stan. “No.” He hesitates for a moment, then looks down at his sleeves and starts to fuss with them, pulling them up over the scars on his wrists. “Richie’s not going for an encore performance, I’m sure,” he says.

Hopefully Richie’s in charge. “So what do you think you’re gonna find there?” Ben asks from the front seat. His hand is still linked with Bev’s. It’s a little jealousy-inducing, yeah, because Eddie’s boyfriend lives in the goddamn sewers and Ben and Bev are so fucking *easy* around each other, out of months of cohabitation. Meanwhile Eddie can’t even say *I love you* to his actual boyfriend who *died for him*, because of trauma or some shit.

Fucking trauma.

“Some answers,” says Stan. “Bev’s old place didn’t have anything concrete, but—there might be records there. We kept a lot of records, there could be a death certificate on there.”

“You think Pennywise was Jewish?” Bev asks.

“I think his daughter was, at least,” says Stan. “Her blouse was torn, like in mourning. It’s traditional to rend your clothes when you get the news of a loved one’s death.”

Eddie remembers, suddenly: Stan had deliberately torn his right sleeve, after Neibolt. He hadn’t thought much about it, since all their clothes were fucked up as hell after Neibolt (and Eddie’s were spattered with Richie’s blood), but now he thinks—well. Nothing like seeing your best friend’s cooling corpse to knock the news of his death home.

They climb out of the car, and Eddie takes Ben from Bev for a while, as she and Stan climb up the stairs. “The Deadlights club,” he mutters.

Ben slants his gaze over to Eddie. “You think that’s how Stan seems to just—know things, sometimes?” he asks. “The Deadlights?”

“No,” says Eddie. “No, he knew stuff before It tried to eat him.” He waves a hand as he and Ben make their slow, lurching way up the steps to the synagogue, following in Bev and Stan’s footsteps. “He always sort of—knew where to find the rarest birds, without asking anyone. And Richie used to ask Stan for help whenever his glasses got lost, because Stan would always find them first.” He pauses, thinking back now to some of the things Stan’s said, since leaving Derry the second time. “I think whatever he had before,” he says, “it got—stronger, after the Deadlights. Clearer, maybe. That’s why he’s got more of an idea where to go than we do.” *And why he nearly killed himself rather than go back.*

“What about you?” Ben asks. “You’ve got a token, and Richie managed to get to you first, but you never saw the Deadlights.”

Eddie hesitates a moment. Then he says, “You heard him, in the cistern.”

Ben doesn’t say a word, but his eyes shine with sympathy and, moreover, *understanding*. Because he’s been there, Eddie knows. Because he’s felt that yawning ache in his chest, felt his heart crack with the pain of *almost*. “Yeah,” he says. “You think that’s why?”

“It’s why I moved here,” says Eddie. “I know you guys would’ve done the same, Mike was about to—”

“It wasn’t exactly a sacrifice for you, though,” says Ben.

“Yeah,” says Eddie. “Because I don’t have a job or a wife. Or much of a life left in New York.” Then he pauses, and says, with all the hushed tones of a confession, “And I—wanted to be close to him. Kinda fucked up, right? Wanting to be in Derry?”

“Not really,” says Ben. “It’s Richie. You two have always been kinda,” he pauses, then spins two fingers around in a circle.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Eddie asks.

“You guys orbit each other,” Ben says. “Where one of you goes the other tends to go too. We had to stop you from walking right back into the sinkhole on Neibolt, remember? You just—You *look* for him, actively.” He leans his weight a little more on Eddie as Eddie shoves the doors to the synagogue open, just in time to see Bev and Stan talking quietly with a volunteer at the desk. As Eddie watches, a few men wearing kippahs and prayer shawls walk past, arguing furiously but quietly over something. “Not even Mike would do that,” says Ben, “because Mike’s careful. He’d talk to Richie through dreams, and he’d leave meals at sewers, because he loves him, but he wouldn’t do what you’re doing. He doesn’t orbit Richie the same way you do.”

Eddie doesn’t say anything, just maneuvers Ben to a nearby bench. No wonder Bev fell in love with Ben through his poetry, he just came up with some astronomy shit to describe his two best friends’ relationship. “You should be the writer,” he says. “Hell, you know what? You should ghostwrite for Bill.”

"Nah," says Ben. "Not much of a horror guy." He holds his arm gingerly across his chest, wincing a little, but it looks like the bleeding's stopped for now, the makeshift bandage hasn't gotten any darker. Good on Bev for thinking fast. "I guess I just answered my own question, huh?" he says, quietly.

"I guess you did," says Eddie. "Plus I'm nearer. New York's just a seven-hour drive to Bangor if traffic's good and you take the I-95. Stan's in Atlanta and that's, what, fourteen hours without a break?"

"That's one factor," Ben allows, "but you're the one he confessed to. I'm pretty sure that's a huge factor too." He glances over at Bev, and says, "You love him, and he loves you. That's a magic all by itself."

"You sound like a Hallmark movie," Eddie says. "You're sure you don't want to write books instead?"

"Buildings are a lot easier than books, I've found," says Ben, just as Stan breaks away from Bev and the volunteer to walk over to them. "Hey, are they gonna let us look?"

"Just me," says Stan. "But I can have you guys outside, and I'd rather have that much, so—"

"Of course," says Eddie. "Yeah, just scream for help if you need us." Hopefully, he won't.

--

Once, a very long time ago, a young boy made a home for his friends underground. He made it with love and care, sealed up the holes and kept the water out, built it to hold seven small bodies full of hormones coexisting in the same space. Richie had always felt that there was a little bit of magic to the clubhouse, just because of how much love Ben put into the whole endeavor.

He knows there still is, now, because the second he sets foot in it again It retreats to the back of his head, staying quiet as Richie descends the ladder to the floor. Even now, he can feel Ben's innocent love for all his friends wrap around his shoulders like a warm blanket.

God, Ben. *Ben*. Fuck, he'd hurt him.

He drops to the floor and looks up at the trapdoor. The clubhouse is much, much bigger than it had been when Richie was last here, and he doesn't think that's a consequence of Ben's magic. No, he thinks it's a little like It, with its cistern under Neibolt. He picked a home base, so now it's—growing, for lack of a better term. But Richie can still feel Ben's love even as the clubhouse grows, and maybe that's why even now there's still daylight peeking through. It isn't so dark, down here.

And It doesn't have as much strength, down here, the way It does in the sewers of Derry, the way it did when Richie tried to walk away and It had just—shoved him out of the driver's seat and taken his body for a spin. Bitchass clown.

God, Ben. He really hopes Ben's all right. Bev fixed him up as well as she could, but those damn *claws* sure felt like they went in deep. And It was giggling all the while as it pinned Ben underneath like a butterfly to a board, whispering, ***you're not gonna die alone, haystack, your old friend richie wouldn't let you.*** God bless Ben's quick thinking, yanking Richie's glasses off his face, throwing It off just enough for Richie to kick it out of the driver's seat.

He curls up on the floor, rests his head against the wall. Probably a good thing that Bill and Mike hadn't rounded out the club. It wouldn't be able to resist if they did. It's *obsessed* with the Losers, all seven, but Bill's their leader and Mike yanked Its heart out of its chest. If all seven of them are here in Derry—

Well, Richie doesn't want to chance it. Let Bill and Mike and Audra stay far away from Derry for as long as humanly possible. Richie can hold out.

how long do you think you'll last? It asks.

Richie doesn't freeze up as much as he did, that first horrible time when he'd woken up and It had first spoken to him. He buries his hands in his hair and tugs, hard, focusing on that pain instead of It, whispering inside of his ear. For a moment the voice subsides, and Richie can pretend he's alone again for a little while. Alone is fine.

Alone is just fine. He's good at it, these days.

Unbidden, the memory of Stan's and Eddie's hands on him, holding him back, bubbles back up to the forefront of his memory. For a moment, for a blessed moment, It had shut up and Richie could breathe again. Certainly It hadn't been far, has never been far since it's taken up space in Richie's body, but Eddie had held his hand and suddenly that hadn't mattered quite as much. Only Eddie's hand in his, the steady warmth of it.

Richie tugs his knees up to his chest, and the smile that steals over his lips is soft, nostalgic, hopeful. Eddie had kissed him and kissed him and *kissed him*, wowza, kissed him but *good*, as though Richie's worth something all on his own. Richie has never been kissed that way, not by the women hired by his agency to make him seem relatable, not by the men he took to his bed. Fuck, if he could go back in time and somehow rewrite history so Eddie Kaspbrak had been his first kiss, he would. He would.

He wishes he could have more. He wishes a lot of things, but between the two of them, between the seven of them, someone ought to be realistic about his chances of making it out of this alive.

But that's fine. That's fine. As long as Eddie makes it out, as long as all of the Losers make it out, then Richie's okay. And until then he'll steal as much time and as many kisses as he can.

oh, richie. and how much time do you think it will be until you lose him?

Richie shuts his eyes. "Shut up," he croaks.

one way or another you're going to lose him. you lost him already, when he left you in the dark. Something caresses his cheek, almost tender, and Richie wants to scream. Goes to grab for It, and finds nothing but thin air. ***you hate going missing. he knew that. he could've brought you out.***

"I'm not listening to you," says Richie, trying to plug his ears and shut his eyes. "Shut the *fuck* up, god, you stupid fucking—they thought I was *dead*, I don't blame them. I *don't*."

why wouldn't you? It sounds so childishly outraged, as though Richie's committed some mortal sin against it. ***they left you! i saved you, richie! i had to, you were so lonely and so scared, i couldn't leave you alone, not like your old "friends" did. i blame them.*** Slimy hands rest against his cheeks, and Richie chokes back a scream. He won't look. He can't. He won't—

look at me, richie, It pleads, and at the same time forces Richie's eyes open.

A young boy looks back at him, with sad eyes. *His eyes.* Little Richie Tozier's crouched in front of him, looking for all intents and purposes exactly the same as he did twenty-seven years ago, right down to the Freese's shirt. His hands are planted firmly on either side of Richie's face, and for a moment Richie cannot summon up any other emotion other than complete fucking bafflement, because what in the goddamn fuck.

Then he sees that flash of gold in the other Richie's eyes, and understands.

"i stayed with you," It says, in the voice of a thirteen-year-old Richie, high and piping. ***"i never left. what does that wheezy little mama's boy know? he's done nothing but run away his whole life. he ran from derry, he ran from his mother and his wife, he'll run from you."***

"He moved here for me," snarls Richie, and in a flash he's pinned the younger Richie to the ground, hands around his neck. ***"And I wouldn't have been down there in the fucking cistern if it wasn't for you, you shitty fucking alien clown! You killed Georgie, you almost killed Eddie, you did kill me! Don't fucking pretend you're my fucking friend now!"***

It looks up at him, and—smiles. From one moment to the next, Its hand shoots upward, grabs Richie by his neck, and flips them both over, and suddenly Richie's looking at himself at twenty, stupid floppy hair and all, only the eyes are a burnished gold. Only there's an earring dangling from his right ear. Only his jacket is silvery-white, with orange buttons trailing downward. ***"maybe not,"*** It says, in a low, breathy Voice that makes Richie's blood run cold, the Voice

of a club kid that Richie had run into in New York and whose voice and mannerisms he'd pulled into his standup routine and exaggerated for effect. ***“but i’m the one that saved you, not them. not wheezy little eddie kaspbrak. remember that? remember i pulled breath back into your dead lungs? i didn’t have to, but i did, because i just couldn’t bear to see you so alone.”***

Anywhere else that might’ve worked, or at least planted some seed of doubt. But here in the clubhouse, where Richie can *feel* the sweet, childish love of a young boy for his first real friends settle over him like a warm blanket, it falls flat, and he snarls, “Fuck *you*.” He shoves It off, hard, and gets to his feet as It rolls away. From one blink to the next, though, it simply—disappears, as though it was never there.

Which is true, isn’t it. It had never been there, had only produced illusions, because leaving Richie’s body even to creepily manipulate him would be the death of them both. But how *real* those illusions had been.

remember that, Its voice echoes around the cavern, just then.

Richie swallows the bile that rises in his throat.